
BACCANO!
1934 Alice in Jails: Streets
RYOHGO NARITA

Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Characters

Epilogue II: The Triumphal Return of the Vice President

Chapter 1: Mistimed Prologues

- Prologue V—Miscreant Formation
- Prologue VI—The Mafia Returns
- Prologue VII—Unnatural Blessings

Chapter 2: Misdirected Hysteria

Interlude I: Mischief Below Alcatraz Island

Chapter 3: A Misaimed Square Hit

Chapter 4: Misfits Outside the City

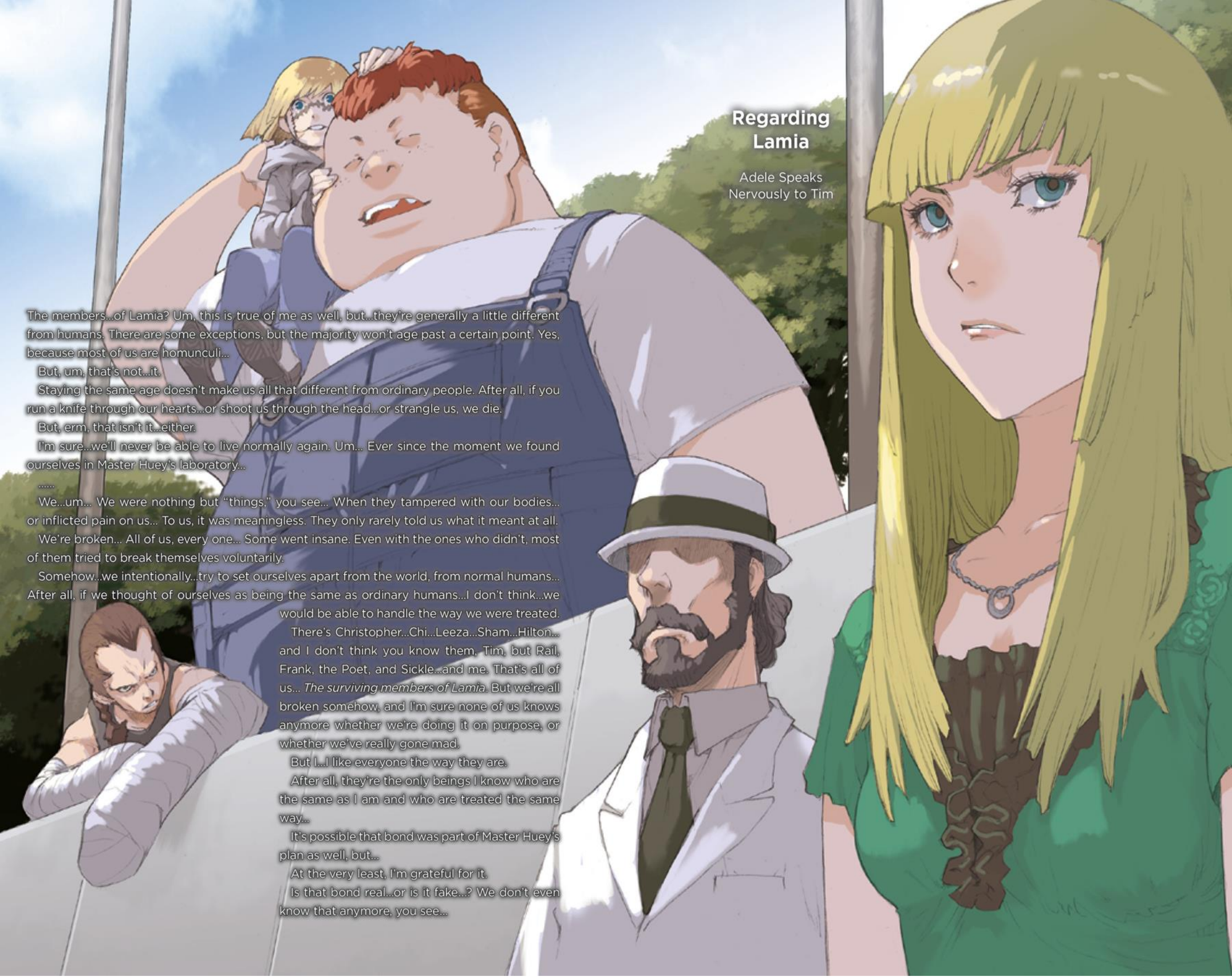
Linking Chapter: Misperceptions and Information

Digression: Can't Miss

Afterword

Yen Newsletter


BACCANO!
1934 Alice in Jails: Streets
RYOHGO NARITA
ILLUSTRATION BY KATSUMI ENAMI



Regarding Lamia

Adele Speaks Nervously to Tim

The members...of Lamia? Um, this is true of me as well, but...they're generally a little different from humans. There are some exceptions, but the majority won't age past a certain point. Yes, because most of us are homunculi...

But, um, that's not...it.

Staying the same age doesn't make us all that different from ordinary people. After all, if you run a knife through our hearts...or shoot us through the head...or strangle us, we die.

But, erm, that isn't it...either.

I'm sure...we'll never be able to live normally again. Um... Ever since the moment we found ourselves in Master Huey's laboratory...

.....

We...um... We were nothing but "things," you see... When they tampered with our bodies... or inflicted pain on us... To us, it was meaningless. They only rarely told us what it meant at all.

We're broken... All of us, every one... Some went insane. Even with the ones who didn't, most of them tried to break themselves voluntarily.

Somehow...we intentionally...try to set ourselves apart from the world, from normal humans... After all, if we thought of ourselves as being the same as ordinary humans...I don't think...we would be able to handle the way we were treated.

There's Christopher...Chi...Leeza...Sham...Hilton... and I don't think you know them, Tim, but Rail, Frank, the Poet, and Sickle...and me. That's all of us... *The surviving members of Lamia.* But we're all broken somehow, and I'm sure none of us knows anymore whether we're doing it on purpose, or whether we've really gone mad.

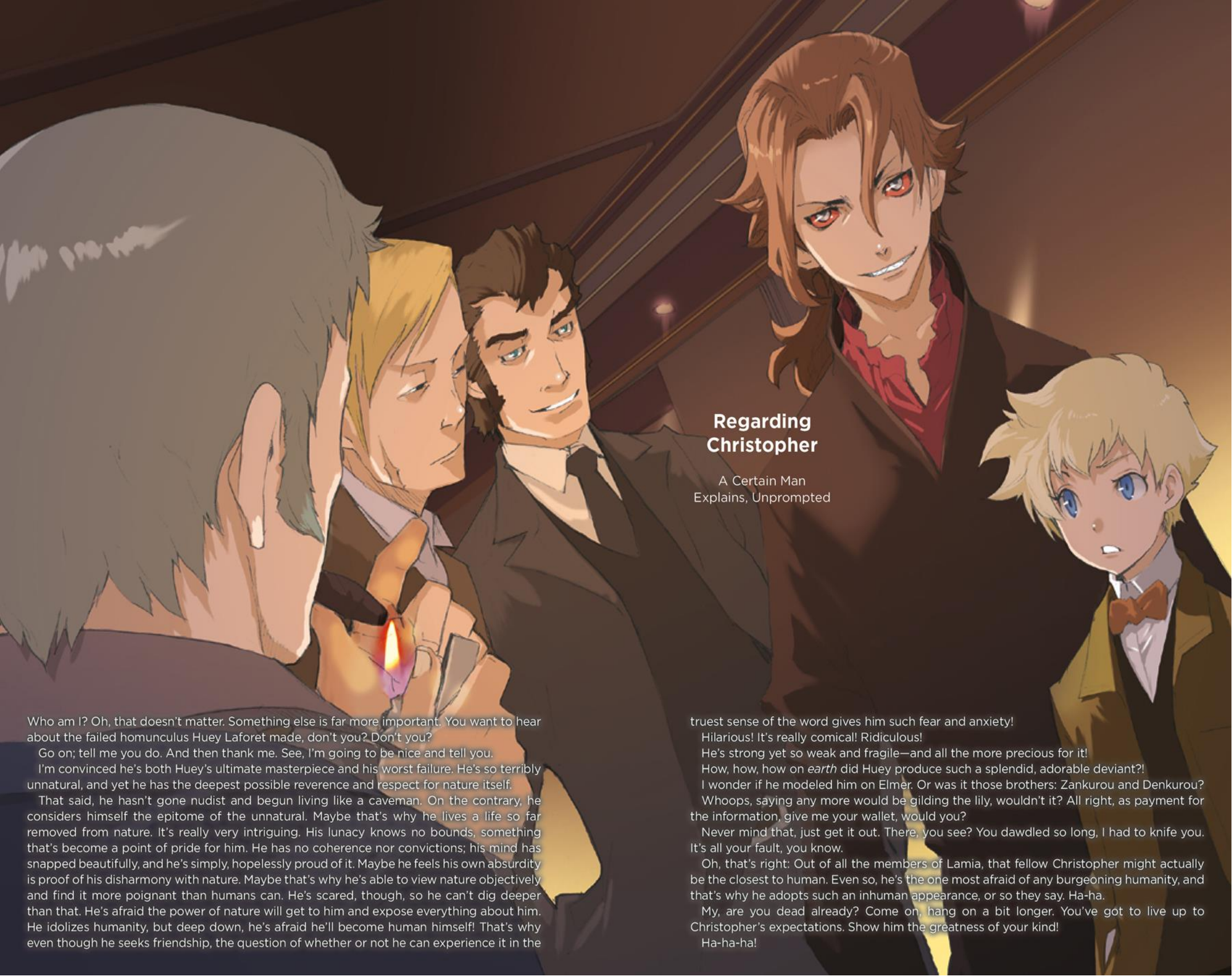
But I...I like everyone the way they are.

After all, they're the only beings I know who are the same as I am and who are treated the same way...

It's possible that bond was part of Master Huey's plan as well, but...

At the very least, I'm grateful for it.

Is that bond real...or is it fake...? We don't even know that anymore, you see...



Regarding Christopher

A Certain Man Explains, Unprompted

Who am I? Oh, that doesn't matter. Something else is far more important. You want to hear about the failed homunculus Huey Laforet made, don't you? Don't you?

Go on; tell me you do. And then thank me. See, I'm going to be nice and tell you.

I'm convinced he's both Huey's ultimate masterpiece and his worst failure. He's so terribly unnatural, and yet he has the deepest possible reverence and respect for nature itself.

That said, he hasn't gone nudist and begun living like a caveman. On the contrary, he considers himself the epitome of the unnatural. Maybe that's why he lives a life so far removed from nature. It's really very intriguing. His lunacy knows no bounds, something that's become a point of pride for him. He has no coherence nor convictions; his mind has snapped beautifully, and he's simply, hopelessly proud of it. Maybe he feels his own absurdity is proof of his disharmony with nature. Maybe that's why he's able to view nature objectively and find it more poignant than humans can. He's scared, though, so he can't dig deeper than that. He's afraid the power of nature will get to him and expose everything about him. He idolizes humanity, but deep down, he's afraid he'll become human himself! That's why even though he seeks friendship, the question of whether or not he can experience it in the truest sense of the word gives him such fear and anxiety!

Hilarious! It's really comical! Ridiculous!

He's strong yet so weak and fragile—and all the more precious for it!

How, how, how on *earth* did Huey produce such a splendid, adorable deviant?!

I wonder if he modeled him on Elmer. Or was it those brothers: Zankurou and Denkurou?

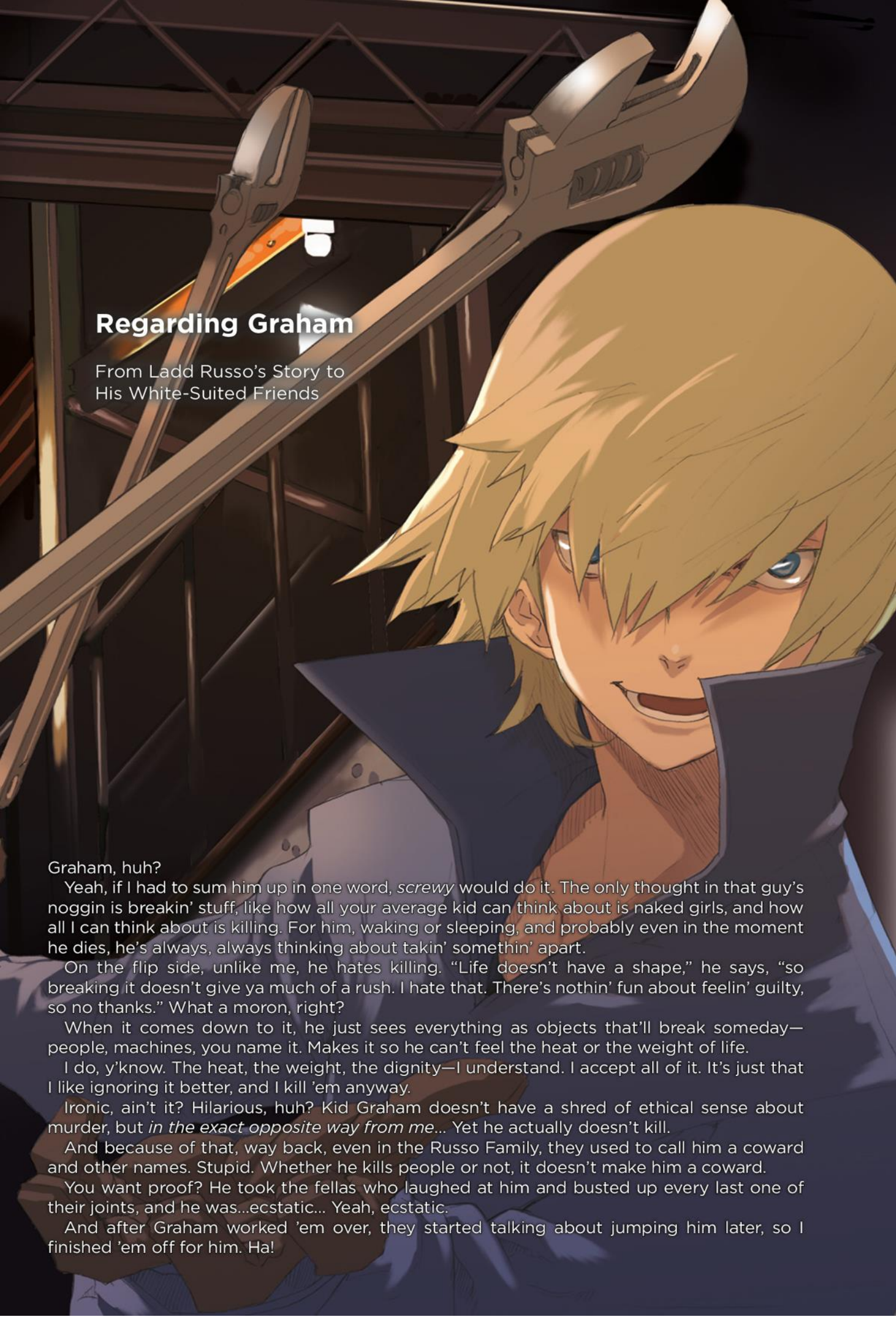
Whoops, saying any more would be gilding the lily, wouldn't it? All right, as payment for the information, give me your wallet, would you?

Never mind that, just get it out. There, you see? You dawdled so long, I had to knife you. It's all your fault, you know.

Oh, that's right: Out of all the members of Lamia, that fellow Christopher might actually be the closest to human. Even so, he's the one most afraid of any burgeoning humanity, and that's why he adopts such an inhuman appearance, or so they say. Ha-ha.

My, are you dead already? Come on, hang on a bit longer. You've got to live up to Christopher's expectations. Show him the greatness of your kind!

Ha-ha-ha!



Regarding Graham

From Ladd Russo's Story to
His White-Suited Friends

Graham, huh?

Yeah, if I had to sum him up in one word, *screwy* would do it. The only thought in that guy's noggin is breakin' stuff, like how all your average kid can think about is naked girls, and how all I can think about is killing. For him, waking or sleeping, and probably even in the moment he dies, he's always, always thinking about takin' somethin' apart.

On the flip side, unlike me, he hates killing. "Life doesn't have a shape," he says, "so breaking it doesn't give ya much of a rush. I hate that. There's nothin' fun about feelin' guilty, so no thanks." What a moron, right?

When it comes down to it, he just sees everything as objects that'll break someday—people, machines, you name it. Makes it so he can't feel the heat or the weight of life.

I do, y'know. The heat, the weight, the dignity—I understand. I accept all of it. It's just that I like ignoring it better, and I kill 'em anyway.

Ironic, ain't it? Hilarious, huh? Kid Graham doesn't have a shred of ethical sense about murder, but *in the exact opposite way from me*... Yet he actually doesn't kill.

And because of that, way back, even in the Russo Family, they used to call him a coward and other names. Stupid. Whether he kills people or not, it doesn't make him a coward.

You want proof? He took the fellas who laughed at him and busted up every last one of their joints, and he was...ecstatic... Yeah, ecstatic.

And after Graham worked 'em over, they started talking about jumping him later, so I finished 'em off for him. Ha!



Regarding Renee

From a Private Conversation
with Mr. Cal Muybridge, Chairman
of the Nebula Corporation

Renee? Uh, which Renee would that be again?

Oh, the hot lil' tomato in the pharmaceutical sector, Development Department Six? Sure, I know her real well.

Her full name is, uh, whatchamacallit... Renee Parmedes Branvillier, I think. God, what a name. It's a wonder anyone can remember it, y'know?

Still, that body is a real treat, lemme tell ya. Her face makes her look like a proper little lady, but those curves are downright sexy, don'tcha think? Erotic. Kinda nice, ain't it?

...Hmm? Oh, oh yeah. Okay, I know, you're here to ask about somethin' else, not about that. I just assumed we were gonna have a beauty pageant or somethin'. Okay, well, I'll see you around, then.

Hmm? What? You weren't done yet?

Ah, well, see, if this is about somethin' else, if I were you, I wouldn't get involved with her. No, I mean that. Right now, she's, well, she's researchin' some sort of immortality drug, and there are rumors that she's just snatchin' people from all over for human experiments. Frankly, it's a bit of a problem. Well, there's no proof, so our hands are tied, and besides, she's pretty popular with the fellas in the company. I can't just run her off or get rid of her, y'know?

Yeah, I'm aware of what she's been doin' behind the scenes. The mess with those twelve hundred people in New York, for example.

Well, I'm usin' her, too, and I bet she thinks of me and mine only as tools or guinea pigs or some such. We'll see which of us ends up holdin' the reins. It's a contest. How about it, fella? Want to place a bet? Will she get the upper hand and ruin me, or will my crafty machinations keep us all in suspense?

When I tallied up the bets among the directors, right now, the odds are about ninety-nine to one. The ninety-nine is that I go down in flames. They just don't trust me.

Well, that only goes to show how much faith they put in her abilities.

EPILOGUE II
THE TRIUMPHAL RETURN OF
THE VICE PRESIDENT

CHAPTER 1
MISTIMED PROLOGUES
PROLOGUE V—MISCREANT FORMATION
PROLOGUE VI—THE MAFIA RETURNS
PROLOGUE VII—UNNATURAL BLESSINGS

CHAPTER 2
MISDIRECTED HYSTERIA

INTERLUDE I
MISCHIEF BELOW ALCATRAZ ISLAND

CHAPTER 3
A MISAIMED SQUARE HIT

CHAPTER 4
MISFITS OUTSIDE THE CITY

LINKING CHAPTER
MISPERCEPTIONS AND INFORMATION

DIGRESSION
CAN'T MISS



Design: Yoshiko Kamabe

BACCANO!

1934 Alice in Jails: Streets

VOLUME 9

RYOHGO NARITA
ILLUSTRATION BY KATSUMI ENAMI

YEN ON
NEW YORK

Copyright

BACCANO!, Volume 9: 1934 ALICE IN JAILS: STREETS

RYOHGO NARITA

Translation by Taylor Engel

Cover art by Katsumi Enami

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

BACCANO! Vol.9

©RYOHGO NARITA 2006

First published in Japan in 2006 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2018 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

1290 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10104

Visit us at yenpress.com

facebook.com/yenpress

twitter.com/yenpress

yenpress.tumblr.com

instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: December 2018

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Narita, Ryōgo, 1980– author. | Engel, Taylor, translator.

Title: Baccano! / Ryohgo Narita ; translation by Taylor Engel.

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen On, 2016–

Identifiers: LCCN 2015045300 | ISBN 9780316270366 (v. 1 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316270397 (v. 2 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316270410 (v. 3 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316270434 (v. 4 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316558662 (v. 5 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316442275 (v. 6 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316442312 (v. 7 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316442329 (v. 8 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316442343 (v. 9 : hardback)

Subjects: | CYAC: Science fiction. | Nineteen twenties—Fiction. | Organized crime—Fiction. | Prohibition—Fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Science Fiction / Adventure.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.N37 Bac 2016 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at http://lccn.loc.gov/2015045300

ISBNs: 978-0-316-44234-3 (hardcover)

978-0-316-44235-0 (ebook)

E3-20181112-JV-NF-ORI

CHARACTERS

Christopher Shaldred	One of Huey's hand-raised homunculi. Has red eyes and dolphin teeth, and could be mistaken for a vampire walking around.
Ricardo Russo	The grandchild of Placido, the Russo Family don. Concerned about having such a feminine appearance.
Rail	A member of Lamia, a group of Huey's henchmen. A bomb fiend with a heavily scarred face. Idolizes Nice.
Frank	A member of Lamia. Rail's buddy. Just a big kid.
"The Poet"	A member of Lamia. A master-like figure who's partially responsible for the odd speech modes of Christopher and the others.
Sickle	A member of Lamia. A beauty with amazing footwork. Despite being a capoeira user, she's always unfriendly.
Sham	A member of Lamia. A spy and liaison who's cloaked in mystery.
Hilton	A member of Lamia. A spy and liaison, like Sham.
Hong Chi-Mei	A member of Lamia. A sullen-faced Asian who fights with iron claws. One of Christopher's few friends.
Leeza	A member of Lamia…or so it seems, but she doesn't quite fit in. Huey's daughter.

Huey Laforet	One of the immortals and Chané's father. He's currently in jail, but…
Renee Parmedes Branvillier	A Nebula executive. She seems a little dim—because she is—but she's constantly smiling and cheerfully cruel.
Graham Specter	A wrecker and Ladd's sworn kid brother. He seems to know Jacuzzi and Chané as well…
Shaft	Graham's underling. In charge of making snappy comebacks.
Placido Russo	The don of the Russo Family. Earlier, he was targeted by the police and the surrounding mafia, but…
Krieck	A Russo Family executive.
Firo Prochainezo	A young Martillo Family executive. Became immortal as a baby face and is not happy about it.
Ladd Russo	The Russo Family don's nephew. A bloodthirsty killer with several screws loose. Almost settled down and started acting his age, but couldn't stick with it.
Gustav St. Germain	The vice president of the *Daily Days* newspaper. A shrewd journalist with a dignified voice. This is background information that won't show up in the main story, but he has a photographic memory.

Carol	The DD newspaper's young photographer. Couldn't possibly be out of elementary school. A self-proclaimed "courageous coward."

Download all your Fav Light Novels from

Just Light Novels

Stay up to date On Light Novels
updates by Joining our DISCORD group



Epilogue II: The Triumphal Return of the Vice President

“Vice President! We’re here! Wake up, please! Hurry, hurry!”

New York, at Pennsylvania Station…

The sweet voice seemed unsuited to the iron trains here in the easternmost station on the transcontinental rail line, the gateway to the quintessential American city.

“Come on! I’ll go without you! If you oversleep and end up going back west, the president will laugh at you! Mr. Nicholas will get that smirk on his face, and Mr. Henry will snort at you, and melancholy Mr. Elian will turn manic, and Miss Rachel will start stealing rides on trains again!”

Calling out in a voice like a bird’s song, the young girl flew out of the elegant, powerful, and somewhat vintage train.

The station wasn’t especially crowded, but the mass of people constantly shifted as each individual marched toward their goal with unerring steps.

The girl who’d dashed out of the train kept turning around and around on the spot, as if she was searching for her own destination.

She appeared to be younger than fifteen years old, and her general behavior suggested the same.

However, around her neck was a journalist’s camera, an accessory that didn’t fit her at all, and the mismatch seemed to highlight the girl’s extreme youth.

It most certainly wasn’t a toy. The contrasting black and silver of the Leica made for an imposing image.

But the girl made no attempt to live up to the majesty of her camera and hummed to herself as she waited for her companion to disembark from the train. “Lu-lu-la-la-lu-lu-la.”

Then, when the girl had twirled around several times and was getting quite dizzy, the man appeared.

“Hmm… Don’t rush me so, Carol.”

A man in his prime with distinctive, sharp eyes was looking out through the train door.

At first glance, he seemed quite young, but the sprinkling of gray in his hair made it impossible to get an accurate idea of his age. His keen, hawklike eyes were on the alert, and he wore a monocle over the left one.

It shone more like a mirror than a lens, and its convex surface reflected a distorted version of the station interior.

He was dressed quite neatly. From his designer-label clothes and the luxurious umbrella that sat beside his chair, he initially appeared be a key figure in a wealthy financial group. It struck an uncanny contrast with the unmistakably villainous sharpness of his eyes, and those who saw him would not soon forget him.

“Oh, you finally got out! You’re slow, Vice President!”

The girl with the camera turned a carefree smile on her ominous companion.

“Honestly! I can hardly wait to turn my notes on this long trip into an article!”

“For goodness’ sake. You should be aware that if the human heart is only able to beat a certain number of times over the course of a life, then your elevated pulse is steadily whittling away your remaining time.”

“That makes no sense, and I don’t need to be aware of that. For newspaper journalists, life is the speed of your articles! I have to hurry back to the paper and put this story together, along with everything else!”

The girl obviously wanted to get moving as quickly as possible, but…

“Hmm. So speed is equivalent to life, is it? In that case, Carol, I would award you 2,648 points, at most.”

“…Out of how many?”

Carol had begun glaring at him coldly, but the man she’d called vice president didn’t let it bother him. He went on impassively.

“What is of importance to newspaper journalists is the accuracy of the information… Or so I would like to tell you, but in point of fact, that is not necessarily the case. Mere bluffs can be published as articles as well. In fact, they occasionally sell better. What’s important is instinct, luck, and stamina. Your body and mind are your capital, and the pulse of a living heart and brain is the life of a journalist, just as it is the life of a human being… We could state that that is true as well, but as it does not serve as a conclusion, I would say it is also worth a mere 2,649 points.”

“A one-point difference?! …No, never mind. That doesn’t matter, so let’s drum up that moxie and hurry back to the—”

Carol had already given up and was trying to end the debate. However, she suddenly focused on something behind the vice president and gave a mystified yelp.

“Huh? Um… Huh?”

“What is it, Carol? No lady worthy of the name should point her finger at others without due cause.”

Chiding his assistant as she jabbed her index finger in his direction, the vice president began to adjust his monocle.

Questions rising in her mind, Carol asked, “Um. Vice President? You and I were traveling alone for these interviews, right? Just the two of us?”

“Hmm. Certainly, one could say that you and I conducted the majority of our activities on this journey in each other’s company. However, if you have gone out of your way to confirm information of which we are both fully aware, I presume some sort of abnormality has attracted your gaze to its current location—in other words, behind me. For the moment, say what you wish to say.”

“…Um…”

Carol thought for just a moment, and then—

She addressed not the vice president *but the figure behind him*.

“Excuse me. Who might you be?”

At that, the woman huddling close to the vice president’s back giggled a little and greeted them smoothly.

“Good afternoon.”

“Hmm…?”

“Should I say it’s a pleasure to meet you? It’s possible that ‘It’s nice to see you again’ would be more appropriate, but…”

When the vice president turned his head to look behind him, a lone woman was standing there.

She seemed to be an ordinary female traveler. Wearing an easy smile, she glibly launched into what sounded like a prepared speech.

“You’re the vice president of the DD newspaper, aren’t you? Or…perhaps I should call you an information broker, Gustav St. Germain? …Although it’s questionable whether that is your real name.”

The sudden new arrival was confirming their identities with unnecessary dramatic flair.

Carol sensed something rather creepy about all this. She took a step backward, attempting to hide in the vice president’s shadow, but Gustav didn’t seem disturbed in the least. His reply was just as overwrought, almost competing with her.

“Both are the truth, my good woman, so you may phrase your thoughts as you wish. However, the particulars of the position from which you have contacted us may necessitate a change in our attitude.”

Straightening up in an *unhurried* motion, the vice president adjusted his collar with one hand and turned to face the woman formally.

Still wearing a soft smile, the woman calmly began to verify a certain fact about them.

Specifically, that they really were information brokers.

“I have heard that you—the information brokers of the DD newspaper—handle every sort of information in existence. Is that correct?”

“Hmm… Indeed. We are information brokers. *Using information as currency, we purchase money.* To us, information is the standard of society, an absolute value. Its price fluctuates more wildly than the stock market, and its luster shifts through all the colors of the rainbow, depending on the transaction partner. As this is the only sort of merchandise in which we are able to deal, ours is a difficult trade. With regard to products, we can provide you with everything from

human scandal to renown, repute, distant rumors, well-known news, peculiar tales… Even gossip and false rumors, should you desire them. And so, most valued customer who has chosen to rely on our company—am I to assume that is indeed what you are?"

The man's long preface was rather like an advertisement, but he asked his question with the utmost courtesy. However, his eyes didn't hold the slightest hint of flattery. It was as if he'd already discerned the woman's true identity.

Then the woman acted exactly as the vice president had predicted.

She didn't let that gentle smile slip. The motion was slight but efficient. She merely took a small, black, gleaming object from her bag and pointed it at the vice president's chest—that was all.

"Once again, it's a pleasure to meet you. Or possibly it's nice to see you again. Both of you."

"Huh? …Eek?!"

As Carol realized the woman was holding a pistol, her expression tensed.

Meanwhile, the vice president didn't let the introduction of a weapon disturb him in the least. He quietly said to the woman, "I see. When a man handles information as currency, he should naturally admit the possibility of running afoul of a robber and losing it all to theft. If you are not a customer, I suppose there's no need to treat you with courtesy."

"V-Vice President! This isn't the time for…"

Carol was clutching her camera and shaking like a leaf. Shifting his weight as if to shield her, the vice president indifferently delivered his information in the form of a negotiation.

“In that case, young Miss Robber, what information do you desire desperately enough to risk falling into the hands of the local law enforcement? …And before it comes to that, I would like to at least learn your name.”

His attitude toward the robber who had him at gunpoint was unfailingly courteous; however, he wasn’t smiling.

In contrast, the woman beamed as she pointed the gun at him. The small weapon was hidden by her clothing and the vice president’s, and the distant station personnel were blissfully oblivious.

“My name is Hilton. I’m one of the twins.”

It was an uncomplicated introduction.

“Hmm. I see. However…*it would be a great help to me if you gave your individual name*, rather than that of the collective.”

The response was equally simple.

Carol didn’t understand what had happened. Her fingers squeezed her camera tightly.

After a moment’s silence, the woman who’d called herself Hilton shook her head quietly—and replied with a hint of annoyance and a somewhat icier smile.

“…That’s right. That aspect of your kind…is terrifying.”

“Oho?”

“Information broker, information broker! As if that title is enough to excuse you for learning anything you want! You act like you rule the world, like you see everything! Be honest: Exactly how much do you know? About us… About me!”

She hadn't flown off the handle completely, but she seemed ready to pull the trigger at any minute. For his part, the information broker spoke to himself, as if he'd retreated into a world of his own.

"Hmm… How much do I know? The answer to that question would be truly vague, and I expect that even I would be extraordinarily hard-pressed to pin it down… Had you asked how much I wanted to know, I could have responded, 'All there is,' but…"

Brooding half-seriously over that question, the vice president continued, almost talking to himself.

"As I am ignorant, I know only one phrase that could quantify what I know. Let me answer your inquiry with that one phrase. It is 'As much as I can.'"

"I'll thank you not to toy with me."

The smile vanished from her face, and the woman who'd introduced herself as Hilton went on, her tone growing darker.

"You two were hanging around Chicago. You were everywhere. In fact, *you were just as 'everywhere' as we are*!"

"Allow me to correct you, Miss Robber. Unlike you, we are not all across America—conversely, we were where you were not."

The vice president's response was more of a riddle than anything. Hilton ground her teeth; then, calming down, she asked the information broker a new question.

"Yes. That's why we want to know."

She apparently hadn't been able to calm herself completely, however. As she went on, her tone gradually roughened.

"Why was Master Huey's…Why was his left eye stolen…? What on earth happened in the places I don't know about?! I know what I went

through *in Chicago and Alcatraz*—you information brokers were in league with *them*! …Or maybe that's just one possible interpretation."

The muzzle of the gun was wandering. After taking a few deep breaths, Hilton quietly held it steady.

Her anxiety up until that point had been due purely to anger and fury. It certainly wasn't nervous tension from the act of holding someone at gunpoint.

The sharp, steady light in her eyes belonged to someone experienced in the art of murder, and it was clear—not only to the vice president but also to Carol—that the threat was real.

Their backs were against the wall; even if they gave the woman the information she wanted, they might not make it home unscathed. As she hugged her camera, the girl was paralyzed by her fears, but… The vice president gave a little sigh, then shook his head in dismay.

"Are you capable of believing the results produced by your actions?"

"…What do you mean?"

"An information broker who yields to threats will inevitably lie at some point. If he speaks because he values his own life, he will no doubt cheerfully spin any lie that will please the aggressor, in order to preserve it."

"…"

Hilton looked thoughtful, but she didn't shift the muzzle of the gun. She didn't relax the pressure she was putting on the trigger.

Even so, the vice president didn't give an inch.

"The DD newspaper will not yield to threats, nor will we bend the truth. However, if you say this is robbery…then allow me to surrender the information without resisting. All of it."

“V-Vice President, if you’re going to do what she says anyway, be a little more humble about it, okay?!”

The vice president, Gustav St. Germain, ignored his teary-eyed and dubious assistant. Behind his monocle, his eye gleamed sharply.

“If we stay here, the station staff will discover us before long, and there will be a scene. For the time being, let us take this elsewhere.”

“…I was planning on doing that in the first place. It doesn’t look like you mean to run, either. If you intend to trap me, and you know *my secret*, then you know very well…what will happen later.”

“That’s fine by me. In that case, while we are en route, I advise you to organize your thoughts…and to prepare yourself in certain ways.”

“Prepare myself?”

The vice president had phrased his suggestion oddly, and his next comment was even stranger.

“If you indiscriminately rob a speaker of information, then you’ll find yourself learning absolutely everything, even information you would prefer not to know.”

He spoke as if he already knew everything about the woman who’d called herself Hilton.

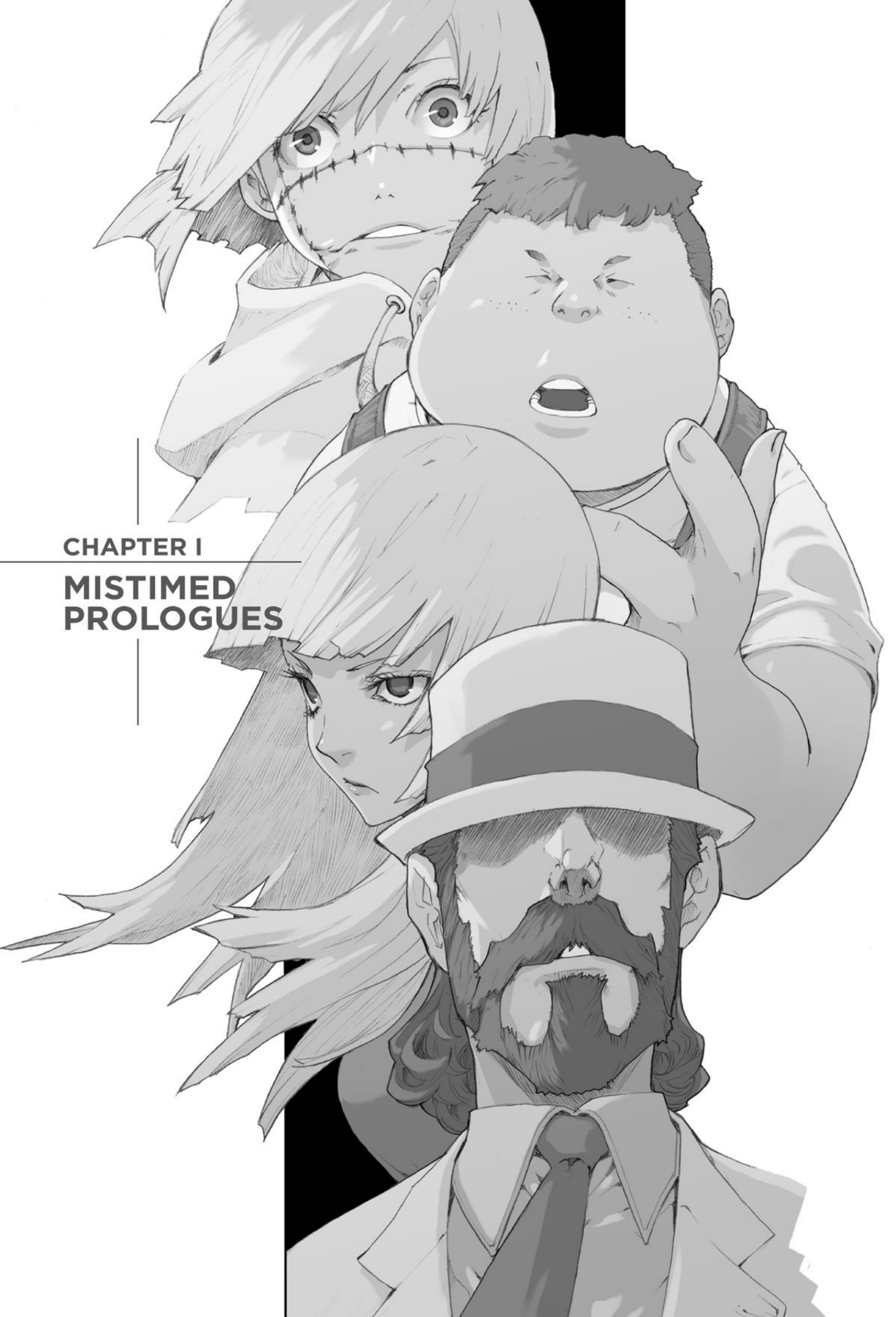
Everything, everything, without hesitation, even what would happen to her later on…

“Remember this. No matter what happens as a result of your acquiring this knowledge…we information brokers are not so cowardly in our trade that we provide after-sales service to those who have stolen from us.”

The vice president’s words were quiet and unhurried, yet weighty.

“Now, then… To assist you in organizing your thoughts, while we walk, allow me to confirm some information concerning you and your people. I shall recount what you Lamia pawns did to the city of Chicago—and what you did not do.

“I will take my time…and give you the unvarnished truth.”



CHAPTER I

MISTIMED PROLOGUES

CHAPTER 1: MISTIMED PROLOGUES

Prologue V: Miscreant Formation

They were…a peculiar group.

⟺

1934 A certain day of a certain month

Chicago Illinois

“It is…an azure wail. Thus responded the sound of the rain.”

“A blue lament… That—is the hue of the soul that calls down the wind.”

A man who wore a homburg low on his head muttered at the vast expanse of water in front of him.

“The blustering wind from Michigan…claims Chicago will be revived, time and time again. By whom? I cannot say.”

The man’s odd murmur was carried off by the wind that blew from the lake.

As he’d said, one could call Chicago a city that had risen again.

The two great cities of New York and Los Angeles were separated, one in the east and one in the west, and Chicago, which lay on the route that joined them, had developed into a strategic point in the circulation of industry, people, and culture. In the few decades since it began growing in earnest, railway and shipping canal facilities had been completed one after another, and as it became an important traffic hub for the American continent, its population grew.

Farming and ranching industries also developed on the surrounding land, and it continued to steadily expand as part of America's breadbasket.

However, in 1871—an inferno to end all others swept over Chicago.

The cause has never been determined, but the fire started from something too small to identify, then mercilessly burned the city to the ground.

Later known as the Great Chicago Fire, the conflagration raged for several days straight, raising disaster prevention awareness all across America—and in those few days, up to three hundred lives, and housing for one hundred thousand people, burned to ashes.

However, some say the recovery that began afterward is the real symbol of the city of Chicago.

No use crying over spilled milk. So…let's build our houses out of something that won't burn, the people thought, and structures of stone and iron began to sprout from the ashes of trees and wheat.

The hardier materials sent their shoots up and up into the sky, more zealous than any plant, and finally formed an enormous building.

The Home Insurance Building.

Although it was demolished in 1931, this was the world's first "skyscraper." After that, the buildings went up with such vigor that they practically did scrape the sky.

Today, the city of Chicago was a great metropolis with a multitude of fire stations—a lesson learned from the inferno—and rows of tall buildings that had developed under the protection of their ranks.

With the prominent Tribune Tower—the headquarters of the *Chicago Tribune*, one of the nation's leading newspapers—it became a city of jostling skyscrapers to rival, or maybe even surpass, New York.

A genuinely great city, and truly one of the symbols of the history of America's development.

Somewhere between that vast city and a lake, the symbol of nature…

Standing on the shore, amid the fierce gusts of wind off the water, the man in the homburg spread his arms wide. Shaking his head slowly, he delivered a soliloquy as overstated as a musical, yet far more contrived than any musical or poetic drama.

"That which is borne by the wind—

It is desiccated algae

It is sand, touched with lukewarm damp

It is valiant light

It is chill air that slashes at the body

In all these things we descry hope and despair, both at once

The difference in temperature will likely give birth to strength erelong."

After his loud mutterings, the man put a hand to his chin and hemmed.

"'Difference in temperature' seems a little cheap… Hmm. What's a better word?"

The brim of his hat blocked the light, and his eyes were completely hidden. However, judging by the lack of visible wrinkles around his jaw, he apparently wasn't that old.

"My comrades. Would you inform this soul, who seeks an answer which lies beyond his station, how time flows?"

The man called behind him, and in response—

—his surroundings offered him perfect silence.

“…Why does silence yet continue despite my query? The stillness at my back becomes a darkness that devours my feet. Clap! Clap! Ohhh, ohhh, hear me, O great king. The silence screams as to annihilate itself, devours my bod— Gwaghf!”

Something struck the side of his head.

The silence, or whatever it was that the man had been declaiming about, had asserted itself by nailing him with a spinning high kick.

“You wanna know what’s cheap? It’s not just the words, Poet. Everything about you is shockingly cheap.”

The attack, which could easily have come from a martial artist, had come courtesy of a woman with a distinctive, husky voice.

She wasn’t even trying to hide her irritation. She glared contemptuously at the man, who was huddled up, both hands pressed to his wounded temple.

The woman had dull eyes, the sort that made her sullen glowering more charming than her smiles. She was probably about twenty. Her face was well proportioned, but the odd dullness in her eyes created an obvious divide between herself and the people around her.

On top of that, although her harsh reply wasn’t vulgar, there was nothing feminine about it. The man she’d just called Poet had once commented on the way she spoke: “Should a goddess come to dwell in a murderer’s well-tended musket, no doubt ’twould be thee.”

However, her appearance was extremely feminine, and if you only went by looks, she could have passed for a young society belle or, in a different era, an aristocrat’s daughter.

The words from this elegantly dressed young woman were incredibly glum and cold.

“Listen up, Poet. Master Huey told us to lie low until we start this thing. Did you forget about that?”

Looking up at the woman with dark blond hair, who was glaring down at him with cold eyes, the Poet nodded quietly.

“There’s no need to remind me. I did think the tap dance you executed on the side of my skull, defying both gravity and male dignity, might encourage my memories to take flight, but apparently my heart is exceptionally delicious. Master Huey’s words have transformed into the migratory birds of my memories, and they have taken a marked liking to me.”

The man’s words did a poor job of getting his meaning across, and the woman answered him with an irritated question.

“Then here’s a question for you: What am I thinking about your loony claptrap right now?”

“Oh! Ohhh! God! God! Two devils have appeared before my eyes, gnashing their teeth on the ground and speaking to me thusly: ‘Dance thou the dance of pouring tears of blood.’ In the face of your transitory anger, no answer holds meaning. The tragedy, the tragedy.”

“Yeah, I’m mad. But no cigar, pal. The answer is ‘Die.’ Or, to put it your way, ‘Burn thou in the flames of hell.’ Is that about right?”

“Such straightforward speech defiles the souls of the words! Acting without speech is even further beyond the bounds of decorum!”

“You’re an atheist, and now you’re screaming about God? That means you’re not just beyond the bounds of decorum, you’re beyond all common sense.”

In response to these insults, the man stood up and began to argue.

“You have that the wrong way ’round. Thus spoke the headless doll, twining its pinions together. My lack of divine faith is the very reason

God descends into my body and is tamed; thus, for the first time, I am able to shout his holy name!”

“Sorry, but at this point, I don’t understand one hundred and thirty percent of what you’re saying.”

“Hrrrm… Do you intend to pose philosophical questions to me? Going beyond one hundred percent is an absolute yet dubious contradiction. From what world does that remaining thirty percent hail?”

“Ten percent is your head, ten percent is your reason for being, and the last ten percent is some number juggling to make the total a multiple of thirteen and trash your luck.”

The Poet nodded quietly to acknowledge the deadpan insults.

“Hmm… I understand.”

A gentle smile appeared on his face, as though he was meditating on the idea—

And in the next moment, in his most theatrical gesture yet, he flung his arms wide, face to the sky; bent backward so far his spine seemed liable to snap; and bellowed his displeasure.

“O God… God. God! I beg of you, bestow sin upon them. A transgression such that I may be the executor of their punishment. For such a cause, I shall shatter them with a super blackjack formed of roadside rocks packed in a casing of fire, then drink in the overflowing dregs of their sin to quench my thirst!”

“You’re nuts.”

Looking fed up, the woman flung an accurate descriptor at the Poet, but—

—behind her, a new voice joined the conversation.

“What’s this, hmm? All that screaming isn’t exactly subtle.”

“We were watching. Sickle, that was an attention-grabbing spin kick you did, too. If a woman does something like that, I think it really, really stands out. Uh-huh.”

There were two voices—one high, one low—and Sickle turned and responded to the two figures.

“Rail. Frank. Took you long enough.”

“We couldn’t help it. We stick out, whether we want to or not. I can keep my face hidden with a muffler and hat, but Frank’s got no way to hide.”

“I-I’m really sorry about that.”

Finding themselves on the receiving end of an ill-tempered glare, one of the figures shrugged and gave a thin smile, while the other looked frightened and shrank a little.

However, the latter—Frank—was still several times bulkier than Rail next to him.

Rail was a slight boy. As far as appearances went, Frank seemed to be the younger, but he was built on a far larger scale.

He was easily over six feet tall, and he wasn’t proportionate: His head was extraordinarily big, as though someone had taken a young child and enlarged him with no further adjustments.

On top of that, he had an extremely thick waist, although it wasn’t clear whether the thickness was due to fat or muscle. Overall, he bore a strong resemblance to a huge beer-barrel doll that had sprouted arms and legs.

Meanwhile, the other boy—Rail—was dressed like any average street kid you could find anywhere, at least at first glance. His body build

and facial features were reminiscent of a ball-jointed doll, and he struck others as vaguely cold.

However—despite his normal size, there was something about him that made him just as distinctive as Frank. Countless conspicuous suture scars ran over Rail's skin, and his exposed flesh resembled a map or a route plan.

It was likely that the skin under his clothes was the same way, all over. A single scar tore right across his face in a straight line, and another ran down from his temple.

There was a thin smile on his lips, as though the scars pulled them up. It was as if they were scornful of the contrast between his own pale, translucent skin and the graphic scars.

The impression the boy gave those around him was that a child had grown jealous of a nearby doll and carved it up with a knife from head to toe.

The ball-jointed-doll boy smiled at the huge beer-barrel-doll child.

"We sure had a rough time getting to this town, didn't we? After all, if they'd noticed Frank was there, we would've been done for. With that build of his, he can't even get through the doors on a regular train, so we hopped a buncha freight trains and walked God knows how many miles."

"I-I'm sorry."

"You don't have anything to be sorry for, Frank! It's that Huey jerk's fault! He shouldn't have called us to a huge city like this! And what's with the orders not to draw attention? That twisted bastard is just having a laugh at our expense, for sure!"

Even though he was smiling, he candidly insulted someone everyone else referred to as "Master."

Frank watched Rail, his eyes swimming with confusion, and the Poet spread his arms happily, offering unstinting thanks to the god he didn't believe in.

"Oh, God has promptly bestowed sin! We belong to Lamia, a suborganization of Larva, and one of our number has extended the apple of Lilith to Master Huey, our creator, our absolute law, our destiny, and our symbol of order and camaraderie! Profanity, sacrilege, foolishness, divinity! In short, we bear collective responsibility, so die and carve a grave marker from your soul, Sickle— Bwaaaaaaah!"

Yelling, the Poet had put a hand into his jacket, but a fluid strike from a foot hit him right in the throat.

Ignoring her companion—who had fainted from the agony, still clutching his hat and his throat—Sickle retracted her leg and turned around, still cross.

“Lucky you. The Poet took on your sin or whatever it was for you.” Sickle heaved a weary sigh over the boy in front of her. “Not that I’m agreeing with the idiot behind me, but you really have no loyalty to Master Huey, do you?”

“So what if I don’t? You gonna report me? They might make me disappear, huh! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Master Huey doesn’t have enough time on his hands to make you disappear over something like that. Besides, he’s probably well aware of your rebellious thoughts already.”

“Yeah, he probably is… And that’s aggravating, too! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Even as Rail laughed, for just a moment, a dark shadow flickered through his eyes. Apparently, he was serious about hating Huey, and he made no particular attempt to hide it. Collecting himself, he went on.

“So who else is coming today? Is all of Lamia going to be together, for the first time in forever?”

“Leeza and Chi. Adele’s being Tim’s bodyguard, as usual. Christopher’s missing.”

“Huh? They still haven’t found Chris?”

The boy sounded surprised, and Sickle answered quietly.

“Even the twins’ information network hasn’t picked up anything, and it’s been a year. We should probably assume the worst.”

“…I see…”

Rail’s face clouded, just a little, at the indifferent reply. Since his lips were still smiling like before, it implied the sutures really did pull on them.

That was when the uneasy mood was interrupted by a tactless stream of noise.

“Within the dusk, dawn gleams. Night’s darkness stops all time, and we live through the days in order to overcome that time. It is an astonishing thing. Nevertheless, ah, nevertheless! Though time wearies me not, the onslaught of unfairness has exhausted me. Just how often must we advance down time’s river in order to meet those for whom we wait? How much further must we dam its flow in order to build a canal?”

“Shut the hell up, Poet. I’ve said it before: You need to hurry up and realize that your meaningless strings of words are an insult to poetry.”

The Poet had finally recovered, and Sickle responded by spitting at him, both literally and figuratively.

Meanwhile, Rail hadn’t managed to catch the gist of what the Poet had said, and he turned to Sickle, laughing.

“Ah-ha-ha. What do you suppose he was trying to say just now?”

“He says he’s sick of waiting.”

“Wow. If he can take a handful of words and make them that hard to understand *without any help*, in a way, he’s a genius. Although he’s a pervert in every sense of the word.”

Rail cackled with laughter. Quietly, the Poet shook his head.

With perfect composure, he walked up to the suture-scarred boy, then gently set his hands on his shoulders.

“What? What’s the matter, Mr. Poet?”

“Rail…listen carefully. Words are great things. Whether through written letters or sign language, it is marvelous to have a way to

communicate something, and to convey yourself accurately to another person.”

The man had abruptly begun to speak normally. Rail tried to figure out what he was up to, but as usual, he couldn’t see the man’s eyes behind his hat.

“Words can completely express the whole world. A look is better than a hundred words, but a thousand words can accurately describe what is seen. Ten thousand can turn that sight on its head—and a hundred million can recolor the world itself.”

“…”

“Words are power. If I believe words entirely, I can even lust after them! However, I don’t yet have enough to be able to manipulate the physical laws of the world with language alone. And so—if, in my stead, you use *your physical power* to send Sickle flying for me, as thanks, I will teach you the magic words that make the world an entertaining plaaaaaaaaaa…”

“Don’t actually listen to him. Nothing good comes of that.”

Ignoring the Poet—whose cervical vertebrae were at risk of dislocation now that Sickle had grabbed his neck—Rail spoke, sounding a little disappointed.

“Ah, drat. You don’t often hear Mr. Poet talking seriously. I wanted to listen a little longer.”

“Well, I can’t have you *blowing me away*, can I?”

With a faint, wry smile on her sullen face, Sickle scanned the area.

“It’s about time Leeza made contact…”

⟺

Some men were watching that eccentric group from a distance.

“…Is that…them?”

The three lurked in a forest away from the lakeshore, hiding among the trees, watching the Poet and the others.

“Yeah, that’s them for sure. They’re an exact match with the notes on this wanted poster.”

“Well, there’s no way to mistake that big round lug for anyone else.”

As he watched the huge boy yawn through the pair of binoculars he held, one of the men smirked and turned his attention to his companions.

“Well. Sure enough, the other brat’s got stitches like railroad tracks on his face, too. Bingo. I’m not positive the other two are part of the group on the poster, but…”

“Well, if they’re not, it’s just bad luck… For them.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Ain’t our fault they drew the short straw.”

“You said it.”

The men shared a laugh over their ominous comments.

They wore long coats and fedoras. It was an extremely ordinary look, but it was clear the men underneath were not ordinary people—they were what was commonly known as gangsters.

This was particularly obvious in the case of the man with the binoculars; a vivid scar that seemed to be from an old knife wound ran across his cheek.

“So what do we do? Are we doing this on our own?”

One of the trio abruptly dropped his smile, and the expression that replaced it was startlingly cold.

He glared at the large boy's distant group with the eyes of a man who could slit somebody's throat as easily as cleaning a fish.

"No… Better not. From what I hear, they aren't just sideshow freaks. Word is, they're the nuttiest of the nutcases in some guy's private army; I think his name was Huey or something."

The man peering through the binoculars still wore a faint smile, and he issued orders in a voice that held no real tension yet.

"Let's get a group together for now. If we can just get rid of these guys…"

"—What happens then, hmm?"

The voice was sudden.

Far too sudden.

The sultry, feminine drawl seemed to have no source. The man with the scarred cheek yanked the binoculars away from his eyes and whipped around to look behind him.

However, he saw no trace of a woman—

And at the same time, his two companions had vanished from where they had just been.

"Huh…?"

His heart thudded violently as anxiety overwhelmed him.

This wasn't the attitude he'd just shown his friends. This tension was rooted in a sense of imminent danger. Sweat immediately soaked his back, and he forcibly pushed back the fear welling up in his brain, trying to understand what had happened.

And at the same time—his eyes registered something at the lower edge of his field of vision.

Two fallen bodies. They belonged to the men he'd been talking with just a few seconds earlier.

"H-hey…"

Slowly, he lowered his gaze. Even before his eyes had dropped all the way, the man could tell the other two were probably not conscious anymore.

The men were lying facedown, with odd, ring-shaped objects lodged in the backs of their heads.

The silver rings looked a bit like angel halos, and they hadn't sent up gouts of blood. They just sat there, sunk deeply into his friends' skulls.

"Who are you?"

When he slowly turned around…

The first thing he saw was several blades.

Then, through the spaces between those blades, he saw a man with a ponytail.

From the man's black hair, yellow complexion, and clothes, it was immediately obvious he was Asian.

Heaving a sigh of apparent sympathy, the Asian brought the blades closer to the man. There was pity in his eyes.

"You were the ones with bad luck."

"That's all that matters."

⟺

"Sorry for the wait."

Sickle and the Poet answered as if there was nothing at all odd about a disembodied woman's voice.

"Yeah, you certainly did keep us waiting, Leeza. Do you have any idea how many of this moron's prose poem atrocities I had to listen to because of you?"

"Ohhh… Has the voice which springs from the darkness brought us the nectar of the poison apple? However, the time is already ripe, and it has overflowed into the sea of despair. It has overflowed! The apple is overripe, even its poison rotted, and no doubt our brains will rot as well ere long. Tragedy, tragedy. When one thinks that the full moon, replete with wrath, will not wane…"

"…Can't you just say 'You're late'?"

Leeza's voice sounded disgusted, but as before, she was nowhere to be seen.

Instead, an Asian man walked up to them and responded to the Poet's cry with annoyance.

"You. You're still talking in that obnoxious way? Are your words and your mind even more broken than they were when you started dragging Christopher down with you?"

"Christopher! Oh, come to think of it, he was the only one. The one great and faithful person to let his soul resonate with the souls of my words! He had an unfortunate habit of wanting to turn poems into songs, but yes, I see. So the power in my words entered his heart, did it?"

"…Never mind. I won't say any more, so you shut up, too."

"Chi, don't engage with that idiot. The more you talk to him, the worse he talks," Sickle remarked.

The Asian she'd called Chi—Hong Chi-Mei—sighed wearily. "Hunh… That doesn't matter now. This is more important."

As he spoke, Chi took a piece of paper out of his jacket.

"Ooh, what's this?"

"I-it looks like there's stuff about us written on it."

Rail peeked in at the paper, intrigued. Far above his head, Frank looked in as well.

The paper of interest held notes regarding their physical characteristics. There was even a simple sketch of Frank.

"…Seriously, what is this?"

"There was a group in that forest over there, watching you. They had it."

Splotches of fresh blood had soaked into the wanted poster. Considering the lack of captives arriving with Chi and Leeza, it hinted graphically at what had happened to the one originally holding it.

Sickle scowled at Chi's impassive report.

"I assume you found out who they were with before you got rid of them?"

"I threatened one of them a bit, but he impaled his own throat on my blade. He was a surprisingly resolute fellow."

"They didn't have anything else that would serve as proof, either. I suppose we should have just kept an eye on them until they called their companions," the sultry, disembodied voice added.

Having learned the creepy fact that someone had been observing them, the odd group exchanged glances, but—

The only one who looked truly worried was Frank.

“Wh-what should we do? Does this mean we’re being watched?”

“Well, that would be its own kind of interesting, wouldn’t it?” Unlike him, the rail-scarred boy’s face twisted in amusement. “Huey hasn’t said to move right away anyway, has he?”

“Exactly.” Leeza’s merrily laughing voice quietly enveloped the surrounding area. “And besides… He still hasn’t decided where to start something: here or New York. It depends on which bait the Bureau of Investigation takes. It looks as if the BOI has bet solidly on New York, but— The problem is Beriam and Nebula’s protégés.”

“What? Hold it. You mean if we’re not lucky, we won’t have a job?” Rail asked.

“That’s about the size of it. Of course, the BOI doesn’t know your faces, just Tim’s group’s, which means there’s a greater possibility that the main event will happen here. However…”

“However?”

“That makes this wanted poster all the more problematic.”

Lowering her voice for a serious moment, she warned the group to be cautious.

“If it was just Rail and Frank, I’d understand that they were being pursued after their activities somewhere else, but this has Sickle, the Poet, and Chi, and it even hints at Tim and the rest of Larva. And the names of other teams, like Rhythm and Time.”

“…What’s going on? Beriam knows my face, but…all the others, too?” Chi mused.

“If we knew what was going on, things would be easy. Although, if worst comes to worst, all we’ll need to do is make this place the diversion and have Tim and the others do their thing in New York.”

Since Leeza was invisible, they couldn't see her face, but from her voice, they could guess the situation was dire.

The news made Sickle a bit more sullen, and the Poet fell silent for a little while.

However, Rail kept smiling as if he was enjoying himself. He took a small paper cylinder out of his pocket.

"It doesn't matter what it is. No matter who we're up against—all we gotta do is play decoy."

The cylinder was about the size of an index finger. He crumpled the wanted poster around it, yanked something out of the center, and immediately hurled the whole thing in the direction of the lake.

The ball of paper arced into a headwind and touched down gently on the water's surface.

"Then, once they've all gathered 'round, we'll just blow 'em up. See? Nothing to it."

The next instant—a dazzling light spread out across the cloudy surface of the lake.

Then came the roar.

The flash and the noise created a burst of scattered light on the water, and in another moment, all that remained was a faint smell of smoke and gunpowder.

The wanted poster, which might have been an important clue, had been turned to ash in the blink of an eye by a miniature explosive.

However, nobody reproached him. Several of the group looked mildly exasperated, but they probably knew there was no need to take fingerprints from it or do any of the sort of investigating the police would have done.

Chi shook his head as if to say *Good grief*, then actually praised the boy.

“Your explosives are so much more powerful than before. I’d expect no less of you.”

Rail laughed, though his eyes looked a little sad.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha. Unfortunately, I’m not the one who made that.”

“Oho?”

“It was making the rounds among Hollywood movie technicians and mining operations; I spotted it and bought it all up. They said it was introduced to the market by a group of delinquents who looked a little older than me, but… Well, it doesn’t matter who made it, does it?”

“…”

Chi had fallen silent. The boy’s smile shifted into self-mockery.

“Besides, not like my name would go down in history anyway.”

At those words, Chi’s silence lengthened, and Rail set off toward civilization as if nothing had happened.

“All right. If they decide to get the show underway here, send me my orders through the twins. Until then, I’ll do whatever I want.”

“Oh, w-wait, Rail. It’s not safe to go around by yourself.” Frank lumbered after him.

Leeza’s bewitching voice called after Rail’s receding back. “You know, there are three corpses lying in the forest over there. If you’re bored, be a dear and dispose of them, would you?”

“…Ha-ha! Making kids get rid of corpses? You’re the worst adults ever. No wonder I turned out so twisted!”

“My, but that twistedness is a virtue. There’s no need to thank us. Just dispose of those corpses, all right?”

“…I hate you, too, Leeza.”

With a short bark of a laugh, Rail raised one hand, signaling that he understood.

As he watched the two of them depart, Chi muttered, as if talking to himself.

“Rail’s gotten to be a lot like Christopher.”

“Yes. He never was shy about his hostility toward Master Huey, but he was quite attached to Chris.”

“That fool… Where is he? What is he doing?”

Chi clicked his tongue in irritation, remembering his friend’s face.

Although Chris was currently missing, the idea that he might be dead hadn’t even occurred to Chi, if his reaction was any indication.

Meanwhile, as if to remind them that Chris was not the topic of interest, Leeza’s voice rose enough to reach all of them, rebounding off the surface of the lake.

“In any case, we’ve confirmed that we are all here in the city. I’ll contact you with the specifics of the job via the twins, so until then—watch out for the people responsible for that wanted poster.”

The remaining members nodded to show they agreed with her authoritative instructions. Only the Poet spread his arms dramatically, muttering loudly with his whole body.

“Very well. From this very moment, I shall wait, wait this evening for Master Huey’s orders like a man possessed. The instant that voice speaks to us, we will repaint the town, replace all its colors with a color of our own. Oh, ohhh, how sacred, how pitiful, these unknowing

captives! As they wait inside a jail they cannot comprehend, may the atmosphere of the world be dyed anew before they know it!”

“You foul up the mood so badly it makes me want to murder you.”

“If you repainted things in your colors, sanity and lunacy would be reversed, pal.”

“You should keep your mouth shut for at least…well, forever, all right, Mr. Poet?”

Chi, Sickle, and Leeza offered their chosen retorts. Then, as if saying the Poet didn’t even exist, they each set off, either for some destination of their own or for an aimless stroll.

All alone, left behind in the midst of true silence…

After making sure that Leeza’s presence had vanished from the vicinity as well, the Poet murmured to himself.

“We, whose abnormality is merely superficial, and a world brushed over in Master Huey’s colors, hmm? To others, could it become a Neverland, or will it be an underworld, where the dead roam? Well, maybe it’s beyond the grasp of anyone. In that case, the role of those imprisoned is…”

Imagining what might happen in this town later, the Poet settled his hat even more deeply onto his head.

It was as if he was mourning the city’s future.

“…When all’s said and done, they will be Alice, fallen into Wonderland.”

⇔

About the time the Poet was muttering that remark—

“…?”

Accompanied by the giant boy in the forest, Rail murmured to himself, sounding mystified.

“Corpses? …There aren’t any.”

His words carried through the trees in vain. No one responded.

The wind from the lake blew through the woods, but there wasn’t even the faintest scent of blood.

Only tepid air swept around the boys.

Eerie, ghostlike.

Prologue VI: The Mafia Returns

An abandoned factory on the outskirts of Chicago

“Ah… Let me tell you a sad…sad story.”

As the automobile industry had developed, Chicago had become a center of production.

The whole city had been bristling with auto factories, demand for laborers had soared, and the number of people working in factories had ballooned. The progress certainly wasn’t trouble-free; discrimination was a problem between black and white workmen. Even so, the developing industry had buried the area around the skyscrapers in the vivid color of steel.

In a relic of that era, a factory where the smell of oil and rust hung in the air, a young man murmured quietly.

He seemed to be about twenty years old. He was sitting on an object that appeared to be part of a big machine, heaving sigh after melancholy sigh.

If all you looked at were his blue coveralls, you might think he was a former factory hand.

Such a bright blue could never have been used on ordinary work clothes, though, and if he’d walked around town dressed like that, he’d be as conspicuous as you could get.

The truly odd thing wasn’t that color, but the object the man was fiddling with.

It was an adjustable wrench, the sort used to tighten nuts.

By itself, the name would suggest it was a normal thing for a workman to have—but there were two abnormal things about it.

One was its size.

The man didn't have a large build, and the silver baton-shaped object in his hands was clearly longer than a child's arm. It felt more accurate to call it a mace from medieval warfare rather than a tool.

The other thing was…

The fact that the surface of the once-gleaming silver wrench was dull with caked red blood.

At first glance, the man seemed slender and mild-mannered. His muscles were unexpectedly solid, but shiny blond hair hung over his face, and the half-open, sleepy eyes behind it were striking.

If all you saw was his lustrous hair and his pale skin, you might have been able to call him a handsome young man, but the color in his eyes was both incredibly dull and terribly upsetting to people who saw them.

"I used to work here in this factory, way back when."

Smack.

Flipping the wrench with his left hand and catching it in his right, the young man went on quietly.

"Definitely not an ideal work environment…and that's enough to make it sad, right there. Oh, man… This is bad, real bad. Just remembering makes me sad. I'm tearing up here. The tears are already right behind my eyes. This is bad, bad, bad. I'm seriously gonna cry; what'll I do? What is this? Huh? What are my memories doing, making me sadder than I already am? What do I have to gain from that now? Not good… What is this anyway? It's terrifying. How come they're doing something that gets me nothing, when they're my memories? Not good; I'm losing confidence in myself, and man, that's sad."

Smack, smack.

The man toyed with the wrench like a rhythmic gymnast with his baton, passing it from hand to hand, back and forth.

The tempo seemed to have picked up slightly…

And the figures who were standing around him quietly took a step back.

At the same time, a man who stood right in front of him shook his head.

“Mr. Graham. You’re getting off topic.”

“Oh, sorry… Right: the sad story. I loved breaking down bum cars and test-assembled components. Anyway, my mind was a little unstable, and I was trying to hold myself together by taking things apart and wrecking cars, day after day. There’s a real knack to taking the pieces out without damaging them, see… But. The factory hit some hard times, and they picked up a side business that was much too sad.”

“Uh-huh…”

“They started piggybacking on the rights and interests of the Prohibition Act and bootlegging liquor. All you needed was a few tweaks to the factory machinery, see… Did they think they weren’t gonna get caught? I couldn’t just overlook it. Sad, huh? *I let my man Ladd get away with killing people*, but I couldn’t let illegal brewing slide. Yeah, I hadn’t liked the rotten air in this factory for ages, and I figured I’d bust it up, so I ratted the place out to the government.”

Smack, smack, smack, smack.

This spinning wrench accelerated, and Graham’s sorrow became more fervent. His eyes were terribly sad.

“Except… Sadly, I couldn’t be satisfied with that. ‘Rotten air,’ human malice, good intentions… That stuff has no shape, see? I wanted to feel like I’d really broken something.”

Smack-smack-smack-smack.

“Aah, aah, how sad… In the end, I turned into a thuggish mafia wannabe, wrecking people’s joints and cars and safes, and I’m tons worse than the bootlegging operation I destroyed! Except… Can you believe it?! When I—when I left good and evil out of it and just destroyed physical things…I felt so *alive*!”

Wff, wff, wff, wff, wff, wff, wff, wff, wff, wff, wff…

The smacks had stopped during his speech, and Graham’s spinning piece of iron picked up speed, like a martial artist’s club.

“Could there be anything else that sad?! What I really, really want to break is myself! I’m what I should be breaking! Every time I think it, the guy I am now makes me so very, very, very, very, very sad

Ultra-sad. So how the hell are you gonna fix that for me, huh?!”

Rising ominously to his feet, still spinning the wrench in his hands, Graham kicked a machine component up off the floor, into the air.

Although the lump of iron definitely wasn’t light, it soared like a soccer ball.

As the angular missile plummeted toward his head, the young man thrust the wrench he’d been spinning up at it.

There was a pleasant *clang*, and the hunk of iron reversed direction, rising slightly.

Naturally, gravity pulled it down again, and he shoved it back up with the exact same force.

“AaaaaAAAaaAAAAAAaaaaaaAaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAaa! AaAa AAAAAAaaAaaaaAAAAaaaaaaah! AAAAAAaaaaAaaaAAAh!”

Creak, crack, clang, crunch, squick, crack, whunk, scree, scree…

The echoing screams in the abandoned factory were joined by rhythmic metallic groaning.

The men who’d been standing around him had already evacuated to safety, and they were nervously watching Graham’s strange juggling from behind pillars.

At some point, he’d taken a small wrench out of his blue coveralls, and he skillfully wielded both wrenches—one large, one small—keeping the hunk of iron dancing in the air.

From time to time, parts separated from the iron lump and fell to the ground, but they hadn’t been ripped off by force. Each part was being removed, whole and undamaged, in such good condition that it could probably be reused.

The screams went on for several more minutes, and then…

“Aaaah…ah… AAAaaaah…”

As if he’d grown tired of it, Graham stopped yelling.

There was no telling when it had happened, but the chunk of iron he’d been levitating had nearly disappeared.

As he fell silent, the young guy stuck the small wrench into his belt and used his now-free hand to snatch a falling piece of metal out of the air.

Steadying his breathing, he checked his palm. The only thing on it was a single bolt about the size of his thumb tip.

Slowly, Graham's eyes scanned the various components that lay on the ground around him, making sure that each of them had been completely disassembled into a single part.

"…"

At some point, the sadness had disappeared from his expression, and in exchange, the grin of a crazed clown appeared from behind his bangs.

"……I broke it down."

Once they were sure it was all over, the surrounding men cautiously approached Graham again. They looked nothing like him; Graham was the only one in coveralls, while the rest were dressed in the ordinary way, like the thugs who prowled around the town's back alleys.

One of them checked on the man, who was breathing evenly by this point.

"U-um… Mr. Graham? Do you feel better now?"

It wasn't clear whether Graham had heard his friend or not. He spun around on the spot, looking up at the factory ceiling, staggering unsteadily in his blue coveralls.

The roof was gone in places, and the night sky was visible through the holes.

On seeing the starlight, the man's eyes grew so moist that tears seemed about to overflow, but those tears weren't from the sadness he'd felt just a moment ago.

"I took that thing to pieces. Fantastic… I took it apart without letting it touch the floor once! Did you see that? Did you? Whoa, that was great! I feel way better; what do I do with this feeling? I knew it… I wasn't wrong!"

Graham stretched his limbs as far as he could in every direction, then vigorously flung his enormous wrench.

The silver tool became a disc, powering toward a gap in the roof, and for just a moment, it disappeared from the factory.

“Life is… Life is *fun*!”

As he shouted, the wrench began to fall. Pirouetting once like a dancer, Graham passed an arm around behind his back and caught the spinning wrench.

After pulling off a stunt that was clearly superhuman, Graham whistled as if to show that it hadn’t been anything big, and his lips curved in genuine delight.

“Nnnn! I thought it would snag a star and bring it down, but no dice! If a star fell down here, though, I guess we’d be dead! Whoa, crap. That’s not safe; that’s real bad news! Maybe we were way, way, way, way lucky that a star didn’t come down, huh?! Now what, huh, now what?! Huh? Wait, is this one of those things? Heaven or the universe must want me to live, right?!”

His emotional pitch was just as high as it had been earlier. Only the direction of those emotions had changed.

Graham was so manic you’d almost wonder whether he was shot up on some kind of stimulant, but his friends looked at one another and exchanged wry smiles, as if this was business as usual.

Graham Specter: Chicago native and former auto factory worker.

In Chicago, he’d been a Russo Family flunky, but when the factory had failed, he’d moved to New York.

Over there, he'd been the leader of a band of hooligans, but when he'd kidnapped a woman named Chané, he'd come into contact with Jacuzzi Splot and the rest of his faction.

He had hit it off surprisingly well with the timid tattooed kid. As a relatively veteran resident of New York, he'd made things easier for them in various ways, and sometimes they'd helped him out as well.

He tended to find more pleasure in the act of destroying physical things than in anything else, and there were rumors that he and Nice had often come into conflict over the difference between blowing things up and taking them apart.

That said, what perplexed the people around him more than that tendency was the intensity of his emotions. One minute, he'd be so sad his life seemed to have hit rock bottom, and the next he was flying as high as someone who'd made a sudden killing in the stock market. He had an extraordinarily extreme personality, and his emotional highs and lows were always all or nothing.

It wasn't clear whether he was doing it on purpose or unconsciously, but it wasn't that he swung sharply between mania and depression. He was always manic, and the capricious shifts in his emotions *only affected the direction*.

From the looks of it, you'd think his personality would have made him difficult to approach, but for all his violence, he was good at looking after people. Maybe that was why a surprising number of them looked up to him.

One of those followers replied with a little applause.

"Wow, Mr. Graham, that was real impressive. Next time, don't use your hands; catch the wrench with your head instead. If you manage it, we'll put in an appearance at your funeral to congratulate you."

Unlike the applause, the words held absolutely no respect, and the man was watching Graham with eyes that seemed to have given up on everything.

“Huh? Are you making fun of me? Damn, the idea of mockery just got me a little worked up. A masochist? Am I a masochist? That’s ridiculous! But here I am, thinking it might be its own kind of interesting. Man, this is way fun!”

“We’re the masochists, for hanging around with you. Well, if you say you’re a masochist, I’m not gonna stop you, so do you mind if I announce some big news that’s going to drive you into a corner, here and now?”

“Whoa, if you get me any more worked up, I might explode! Dammit… Still, I’m not gonna lose! Bring it! I’ll take everything you throw at me, then lob it right back, and if you’re unlucky, it’ll kill you! Aah, this is bad… I’m gonna kill you! Somebody—somebody stop me! My fight has only just begun!”

As Graham responded to his friend, who was shaking his head and sighing, he struck up a staccato rhythm with his feet. If left to his own devices, he seemed liable to break into a dance—But his friend didn’t get caught up in his mood. Looking at him with resignation, the man spoke indifferently.

“Well, it’s about Placido. He says he’s got business with you, so hurry up and get over there.”

Placido.

The moment that name was mentioned, Graham’s rhythmic tapping stopped dead.

“Huh…? When?”

“Just about thirty minutes ago. Right about the time you started talking, Mr. Graham.”

“…Huh? What? Hold it. Hold the phone. That’s weird. That’s really, really weird. Shaft, man, why didn’t you say that first?”

Shaft was probably a nickname. The young guy who owned it answered in a matter-of-fact voice, his expression calm.

“Well… It just didn’t seem like an okay time to talk to you.”

“I see. That makes sense… Well, whatever. We can get over the sadness by enjoying ourselves. Just like I did a minute ago!”

“One more thing, Mr. Graham.”

“Hmm? What? Is it something fun? If not, I’m sending it back.”

As they turned toward Placido’s mansion, Graham asked his underling a question, beaming.

“That story about the car factory going under. I’ve already heard about ten different versions, and I think I got the right to be sick of it. It’s about time you had some new experiences and got on with your life.”

“…You call that fun?”

“The inside of your head is a real gas, Mr. Graham, really-y-y-y eeg-eeg-eeg-eeg!”

“If it’s fun, then laugh, ’kay, Shaft? If you don’t laugh when things are fun, you’ll greet the hard times with tears instead of a smile. See, just like now. Hee-hee-hee-hee-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.”

Still smiling, Graham was holding a wrench tightly in each hand, forming a ring around Shaft’s neck, and squeezing hard.

It sure looked like attempted murder, but maybe because they knew he'd never actually kill him, the people around them were sighing and smiling with chagrin, and no one stopped him.

That said, the only one who was genuinely enjoying himself was Graham.



Chicago The Russo mansion

The palatial mansion on the outskirts of Chicago was just a little unusual among its neighbors.

Lots of tough men entered and left it after midnight, and everybody had figured out the occupation of its residents, but nobody said a word about it.

A car dealer. That was what they called Placido Russo, the mansion's owner.

He also managed several restaurants and hotels, but all those titles were just for show.

Placido Russo was the don of a mafia syndicate that had once held midlevel power in Chicago.

However, starting a few years earlier, they'd found themselves in a run of bad luck that had left them looking jinxed. Their fame and power had dwindled rapidly, and at present, the rumors in the shadows said that their membership was all they had, and that the group was on the verge of breaking up.

Their misfortune had started with a couple of robbers.

A man and woman dressed as baseball players had waltzed off with the outfit's takings for the month, marking the instant Placido's destiny had begun to head downhill.

That same day, he'd lost a spy who had infiltrated a terrorist organization called the Lemures, while his subordinates had been rubbed out by a gang of urban delinquents. On top of that, his nephew Ladd Russo, his ultimate pawn when it came to the dirty work, had broken away from the family in what looked very much like betrayal.

Immediately after Ladd had set off with his pals to rob a train, he'd been collared by the cops, and he was now apparently under glass in Alcatraz.

At the time, Placido had bluffed and blustered about throwing away a pawn that had been hard to play, but that brave front hadn't lasted a year.

His nephew had had a greater influence on their situation than he'd thought. No sooner had the neighboring organizations found out that Placido had lost Ladd than they had started to put overt pressure on him. At the same time, rumors about the robbery also got out to those syndicates.

Once they knew Ladd had cut ties with Placido, several of Ladd's enthusiastic admirers in the lower ranks had begun to openly double-cross the group and go to other outfits.

The tide had clearly turned against him, and as if to finish him off, a dozen or so men he'd sent to make a deal with the Chinese mafia had been slaughtered en masse by persons unknown.

Since the responsible party had disposed of the corpses, the incident itself hadn't gone public, but they had also treated the act as a favor and stripped them of the few interests they had left.

Naturally, he'd initially suspected the Chinese mafia itself— But even if he'd had solid proof, the difference in organizational strength was so great that it was clear his head would be off his shoulders before he could even pull the trigger, let alone successfully retaliate.

In the end, he hadn't been able to turn the tide, and at last, even within the syndicate, rumors about Placido's personal incompetence began to circulate.

The next washup waiting to happen.

The pitiful man that the mafiosi of Chicago talked about over their liquor brought low.

That was Placido Russo.

—Or it should have been. But…

"…You're here, huh?"

When he saw Graham enter the room, Placido spoke solemnly.

From the strength in his voice, you'd never have thought he was pushing sixty, and there wasn't a trace of the claustrophobia of the life he was rumored to have.

"You're late."

"Had to clean up a little trouble."

"Hunh. You'd better not have been up to something stupid like robbing a train, the way you did when you first came here."

"Nah, that time I was just tryin' to outdo a pal of mine. He did somethin' similar a while back."

Desperately suppressing the urge to burst out laughing, Graham bowed with all the respect he could manage.

On his way to this city, Graham had attempted a train robbery.

That said, some journalists on the train had nipped it in the bud, and all he'd managed to do was steal some cash from a guy who looked like a pig with whiskers, so the take had been less than impressive.

As a result, he'd arrived late after a few days hiding from the police, which was disconcerting for the executives who'd asked him to come help out.

"Well, I'll be a solid stand-in for my brother Ladd until he gets out."

"Oho… By the way, why's the fella behind you so purple?"

"Something fun happened, apparently."

Shaft had come very close to suffocating, and his face was still congested with blood, but even as his gaze swam, he kept at attention. On the other hand, Graham had one knee bent slightly, and the adjustable wrench was still in his belt.

Such an attitude in the presence of a mafia don could have cost him his life, but he didn't seem particularly concerned about Placido.

"So what did you need with us?"

Possibly because he didn't like Placido much, Graham kept the pleasantries to a minimum and got straight to the point.

"I haven't had anything to do for the past few days since you called me to Chicago, and I'm bored outta my skull. Thanks to that, I ended up telling my pals the same story ten times, and they just got done bawling me out for it."

"Hmph… Don't be so tetchy. Your group is our trump card. You keep those in your hand until the very end, see?"

"Well, sometimes you get jokers who attack like nobody's business right from the start, too, so I'd be careful if I were you. I mean that."

It wasn't clear who he was visualizing, but Graham shook his head quietly, smiling wryly.

"And? What do you want us to do?"

"Oh, it's real simple. I want you to bring some guests here."

"?"

The comment was mystifying. Was he planning on having him act as a chauffeur? …No, apparently not.

His next words were a straightforward description of the job.

"The other party may come to kill us…but we'd prefer to welcome them courteously, and alive."

"Well, how about that! So right off the bat, we're cannon fodder for our first job? You're saying you want us to bring over somebody with the power to kill us, but we can't kill them, right?"

"Wear them down before you bring them to me."

"…"

Well, I haven't taken any jobs from them for close to five years, after all.

"Yeah, sure. Will do."

"Mr. Graham?!" Shaft yelped, just after his face had finally reverted to its normal color.

Placido was right there with them, and Shaft hastily shut his mouth immediately afterward, but the glare he was sending Graham's way was strongly questioning the wisdom of taking such a dicey-sounding job! At the same time, about half of that look was resignation.

“There are several candidates. You just have to capture one of them and bring them here… And I hear a couple of them are actually children.”

“…?”

Ignoring Graham’s growing confusion, Placido called toward a door at the back of the room.

“Hey, explain it to them.”

At that, the door opened with an audible *click*, and three men entered.

All three were clearly mafia types—and the one in the middle had a distinctive scar running across his cheek.

“So you’re Graham, huh?”

“…Who’re you?”

Graham pegged the man with the scarred cheek as the leader and spoke to him first, but Placido took care of the introductions before the other man could open his mouth.

“That’s Krieck. He keeps the family’s young guys in line.”

“…Hunh.”

Apparently, Krieck didn’t think much of an outsider like Graham. The look he directed at him was openly disdainful.

“Wow. I’m sensing some real contempt, here. Lemme guess: ‘What’s this incompetent outsider doing standing shoulder to shoulder with me in front of the boss? The worthless loser isn’t even mafia. Maybe I should shove that stupid giant wrench up his ass and retighten the screws in his brain, the pasty sea slug bastard.’ Does that sound about right? If it does, that’ll be fun. I bet we’ll have some real good fights.”

Graham made sure they could hear his comment.

The room instantly went tense.

For his part, Krieck scowled crossly, averting his eyes as he responded.

“…I didn’t think ‘pasty sea slug bastard.’ Just the rest of it.”

“Ha-ha! I can appreciate hard-asses like you, y’know. Oh, but you’d better watch out; I bet my man Ladd would hate you, so you’d probably get offed just for making eye contact with him. Ah—don’t get me wrong, I’m not hiding behind his name to threaten you. It’s a serious warning. Watch yourself!”

“Just shut your mouth.”

At Placido’s words, silence descended on the room.

His voice was brimming with confidence and intimidating pressure, not at all what one would expect from a man on the brink.

When Graham glanced at him, Krieck nodded slightly, then took a piece of paper from his jacket and held it out to Graham.

Graham skimmed it, and his pulse rate jumped.

It wasn’t because he’d seen the name of an acquaintance.

“Th-this looks like fun…! What? What are these guys? A circus? Man, oh man… Huh? What? What country is this troupe from?”

He was probably lost in his sheer curiosity. Eyes shining, Graham absorbed the notes from the wanted poster.

The notes described a child who was over six feet tall and shaped like a beer barrel, a boy with suture scars all over his body, an Asian who wore enormous iron claws on both hands, a dramatic storyteller who always wore a hat, and a beautiful blond woman who used a peculiar system of leg-based martial arts known as capoeira.

The people the notes described really did seem like a circus, and Graham's normally half-lidded eyes were now wide open, sparkling like a child's.

The "cannon fodder" was suddenly very enthusiastic, and Krieck gave him a mocking warning.

"I think you already know this, but— Your group ain't associated with us. I don't trust you anyway, but I'll tell you, just so I can say 'I warned you' before I kill you."



Eyes turning sadistic, Krieck adopted the ominous tone he normally used during torture. What he was about to say wasn't an empty threat.

However—

"If you get caught by those guys instead, just you try mentioning the Russo Family name. I'll grind you into such a nasty pulp you'll wish you were a sea—"

"'Kay, I'm off."

Graham hadn't even been listening. Beaming, he crumpled the wanted poster in his hand, then headed briskly for the door.

"Hey… I'm having the young guys hunt up their location right now. You fellas can wait until after that."

Placido tried to stop him, but Graham shook his head lightly, rejecting the proposal.

"If I don't jump right in with something this interesting, I'll be missing out."

Graham left, smiling as if he was in the best mood ever. Behind him, as he watched him go, Placido snarled in annoyance, so low no one else could hear.

"Hunh… What else did I expect from his sworn kid brother? That part of him is just like that idiot Ladd."

⟺

"Can we trust him, boss?"

After Graham was gone, Krieck spoke to Placido through gritted teeth, not bothering to hide his obvious irritation.

Krieck's companions had left the room as well, and he was currently alone with the don.

For his part, Placido sounded perfectly calm, wearing an expression that said he truly couldn't care less.

"No idea. He's top-notch, does everything perfectly except for killing, but… Seems like his loyalty's with Ladd, not me. I'll be watching my back in case he decides to put a plug in it. Besides, the execs who called him over were close with Ladd, too. I doubt there's much devotion to me or the family there."

"…Well, I don't mean to beef about your nephew, boss, but he did leave home."

Krieck didn't know about what had once happened between Ladd and Placido. He was aware that Placido wanted to get rid of his nephew, but when he spoke about Ladd, he did so with token respect.

Placido knew this as well, but he didn't deny what Krieck had said.

"Right. For starters, hit 'em with those fellas and sound out some details about that freak show and their chain of command."

At that point, Placido exhaled deeply, then continued in a voice that was slightly graver.

"*The brass* wanted that information in particular."

Afterward, Krieck and Placido talked about this and that for a while, but suddenly, Krieck's expression tensed, and he whispered a question to Placido.

"By the way, boss… You're not going to give those punks *a shot of the liquor*?"

"They're just pawns. Doesn't matter how many foot soldiers we lose; it won't hurt us."

At the word *liquor*, Placido lowered his voice as well.

And then… He said something strange to Krieck.

“How was it, dying and coming back?”

Wearing an odd expression, Krieck shook his head, rubbing at his throat.

It was as if he was checking to make sure *the lethal wound he’d given himself with Chi’s claw earlier in the day had healed completely*.

“Not my favorite. Sure, it was quick, but I had to play dead; I had no choice. Although by the time we healed up, the other guys had already left the forest. That was a stroke of luck.”

As he spoke, Krieck remembered what had happened a short while earlier, and sweat broke out on his back again.

“The act worked fine when I stabbed my own throat on the spur of the moment, but if they’d checked us over carefully afterward, it would’ve been curtains for us.”

“Hey…the first time you get hurt bad, regenerating takes time. You knew that, right?”

“I couldn’t exactly sit down and think about that at the time. Either way, I don’t want to go up against monsters like them. There’s no telling how many times I’d die.”

“Oh, don’t be like that. True, too much pain is never a good thing, but—”

As he spoke, Placido picked up a pair of scissors that sat on the desk and *jammed them into his own left hand*.

Blood spurted out immediately, but the elderly man shook his head with a crooked smile.

“Once you get used to it, it’s addictive. That nasty bite instantly evaporates…”

The next moment—the blood from the gash stopped moving, and then, like a movie film rewinding, time rolled back for both the blood and the wound.

Like a swarm of insects with minds of their own, the spilled droplets scrambled to be absorbed back into Placido's wound.

Krieck watched with a satisfied smile. Then, bowing deeply, he left his boss's room.

"I'll teach that fool Ladd, too."

Alone, Placido gazed at his fully regenerated left hand, thinking of what Ladd had once done to him.

He was remembering the time his nephew had turned a rifle on him.

The crazed logic Ladd had used.

…And that overwhelming fear.

"The guys I kill, the guys that are fun to kill, are the ones who are completely relaxed. Get me? The type who are somewhere absolutely safe, without the tiiiiiniest *suspicion they might die in the next second. Guys like that. Like, for example—*

"Yeah, for example—

"—guys just like you right now, Uncle."

As his mind vividly replayed the terror and humiliation he'd been subjected to by his nephew—a guy who wasn't even half his age—an expression that could have passed for either anger or delight spread across Placido's face.

"You're right, Ladd. Now, I don't have the slightest suspicion that I might die in the next second."

Harboring a youthful hatred that didn't suit his age, the elderly man spat words at his blood nephew.

"However… You can't kill me now. Never. No matter what."

With no one around to hear them, his words came back to nurse his confidence.

"Bwa-ha… Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha… Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The sound of his own laughter resounding darkly in the room was another balm for his heart.

It was as if, through his mirth, he was reflecting on the magnificence of the power he'd been given.

⟺

"Come to think of it, Ladd gets out soon, right? Is the family going to meet him?"

"What about it, Krieck? Does the boss still want to get rid of him?"

The moment he emerged from the room, he was greeted by questions from the men who'd regenerated with him in the woods.

Krieck gave a brief smile, then answered them in order to set his own mind at ease.

"It's fine either way. We're not ordinary thugs anymore. You fellas felt that for yourselves today, didn't you?"

"Yeah… Well, that's true, but…"

"So did I. When I realized how incredible this body is… I could feel confidence flooding into me. And why shouldn't I? As long as we're like this, there's no way we'll ever lose a fight to the death."

Krieck grinned, and there was far more confidence and ease in that smile than there had been before his death earlier that afternoon. Before, he might not have taken such a condescending attitude toward Graham.

Reassured by the changes in himself, Krieck spoke firmly to his comrades in a voice that was filled with irony and assurance.

“Well, either way, I doubt there’s any need to worry about Ladd. Maybe we’ll leave him alive and use him, or maybe we’ll just bump him off already. Either way, it’s all up to how the boss feels… You fellas know, too, don’t you?

“We’ve got a hostage, after all.”

⇔

The Russo mansion was more spacious than it appeared from the outside, and deep inside…

…a young voice came through a certain door.

“I brought you some soup.”

“Yes… Thank you.”

Inside the room, a woman responded to the speaker beyond the door. Her voice was very faint, but it held a gentle warmth.

It was an odd room. The interior was furnished rather sumptuously, with bookshelves, a bed, and a table with chairs, but a strange sense that something was wrong pervaded her surroundings, impossible to ignore.

The source of the odd feeling was the windows.

They were open slightly, but there were barred grates set into them. The grates looked less like interior decoration or a safety measure to

prevent falls and more like genuine iron bars, making the room feel claustrophobic.

The gaps between them were only as wide as a human wrist, an overt and heavy reminder of the position the occupant was in.

…Of the fact that they were being held prisoner here.

However, they didn't really bother the woman who currently lived there.

Whether she was imprisoned or not, it didn't seem to have triggered anything unusual in her heart.

If there had been a change, it had taken place much, much earlier.

When someone she cherished had been hurt and gone far away, because of her…

It had left her absolutely unable to die.

In order to fulfill her promise.

In order to keep a vow to a man she'd realized she truly loved.

In order to die, brutally and cruelly, by his hands.

As she began to eat the soup brought to her, she let her thoughts run through nothingness, all alone.

The man—Ladd Russo—loved her, and because he loved her, he'd promised to kill her. As she remembered his face, she was enveloped by a strange uncertainty, unsure whether to be happy or sad that she was still alive.

The woman's name was Lua Klein.

Ladd Russo's fiancée let her mind go to her lover, whom she had been told was in a distant prison—and she dreamed obsessively of the day when he would kill her.

Happily, ever so happily…

Prologue VII: Unnatural Blessings

Winter, 1933 Somewhere in Chicago

When the man's eyes opened, he was lying in a bed.

The unnatural scents in the air around him immediately soured his mood.

At first, he was drifting somewhere between waking and sleeping, but as he woke himself up over the course of a few minutes, he gradually realized he was in a hospital or some similar facility.

"Oh… Good. You're awake."

As he shifted and got a spasm of pain for it, a child's voice reached his ears.

He quietly turned his head to the side and saw a boy. The kid seemed to be nearing the end of elementary school, or maybe he'd just started junior high.

His expression was just a little relieved, but something about his face made him seem a rather gloomy type.

At the sight of the boy, the man slowly remembered what exactly had happened to him, and who the child sitting beside him was.

Quietly, quietly, as he bore up under the ferocious pain in his back…

⟺

A figure was dragging himself along in a struggle to escape death, leaving behind a thin trail of blood.

The less-than-respectable individual had eyes that were a deeper red than the fresh blood from his wounds. Specifically, the scleras were crimson, with jet-black pupils in the center of pure white irises.

His weak smile revealed unbroken rows of sharp fangs, top and bottom.

Canines occupied even the spaces that would ordinarily have held incisors and molars, and when the man smiled, they called to mind a dolphin's mouth.

Even more distinctive was his style of dress, like an old-fashioned European aristocrat from head to toe. In combination with his strange eyes and mouth, his clothes made him seem like a vampire or some other sinister phantom.

Christopher Shaldred.

That was the man's name.

He was a member of Lamia, Huey Laforet's private military force, and he'd experienced his first defeat in a full forty years during a job in New York a few days earlier.

Adapting techniques pioneered by Szilard, Huey Laforet had created homunculi on his own.

They weren't like the perfectly immortal Ennis, nor were they like "incomplete immortals," who did age. They had only been made unaging.

Aside from the fact that they would never grow old and die, they lived their lives under the exact same conditions as ordinary humans. However, they were unnatural beings, certainly exceptions to the normal rules of the world.

The experience they'd accumulated had made death less likely, and they'd made free use of those skills as Huey's private soldiers. If they could continue to keep themselves from being killed or meeting with sudden accidents, they would be even closer to "immortal" as a result.

And thus, he'd steadily grown more and more unnatural, and yet he'd been defeated, far too easily, as if it had been decided by natural law.

The fact hit him like a slap in the face, and it drove an unmistakable wedge into his heart.

The other man's name had been Felix Walken. It was apparently a false name, but Christopher didn't care.

Even though he was an unnatural being, his opponent had been far more superhuman than he was.

Witnessing someone so ridiculously extraordinary and terrible had unsettled him considerably. In an effort to pull himself together, he'd come to this Chicago lakeshore to amuse himself amid his beloved Nature and soothe his fatigue, but…

By the time he'd felt the blow run through him, it was too late.

A junkie with a grudge against him had jammed a sharp knife into his back.

He'd killed his attacker easily and gone on his way. That part was simple enough—but of course, since he wasn't immortal, the blood he shed didn't return to him.

As he felt his body heat leeching away with astonishing ease, he was forced to recognize the differences between himself, immortals, and humans.

The light was gradually fading from Christopher's red eyes.

"What's the difference? Even I lived in the usual way—and when I'm dying, I don't want to die… Somebody tell me… What is it? What's the difference?"

While he kept thinking about what he lacked, trying to distract himself from his fear of death—

—he saw a lone figure standing beside him.

Christopher looked the figure up and down, then smiled gently and spoke to it.

“Hi. Will you be my friend?”

At the abrupt question from a terribly creepy, badly injured man, the small figure stayed silent for a few seconds, but…

Finally, he responded quietly, in a faint whisper.

“Friends? …With me?”

The boy was bewildered, but the suspicious man didn’t seem to frighten him. Moving slowly, he held out his right hand.

He seemed to be wearing the ghost of a smile.

“My name is Ricardo. Ricardo Russo. It’s good to meet you.”

⟺

Having remembered everything as he lay in bed, Christopher closed his eyes for a little while and thought.

The boy was watching him from the side, apparently worried. What should Christopher’s first words to him be?

Only a little time actually passed, but so many doubts and questions were throbbing through his mind in rhythm with the pain in his back. Even as they did, fatigue and a drowsiness that was probably a side effect of the drugs were taking their toll, and the urge to go back to sleep coursed through him.

However, as a result, he gave the simplest possible response when his eyes opened.

“Mm-hmm… I’m Christopher. Christopher Shaldred… Nice to meet you, too.”

On hearing the red-eyed monster’s remark, Ricardo nodded silently, and his expression of relief shifted into a faint smile.

Christopher returned the smile with his unsettling dolphin teeth, and then his mind plummeted back into sleep.

⟺

Several days later.

When his mind was completely lucid, and the pain in his back had gradually begun to subside, Christopher reviewed the situation he’d found himself in.

He saved me.

He’d never imagined someone would throw him a rope under those circumstances. Why, when he’d seen the boy there at the end, had he blurted out a thing like that?

Being honest and screaming “Help me” might have increased his chances of being saved, and yet…

Either way, he had indeed been saved, and now here he was.

From what the doctor told him, this hospital had connections to the Russo Family, and the boy was the grandson of Placido Russo, the family’s don.

After learning the kid had gotten help from the syndicate men to bring the dying Christopher to the hospital, Christopher asked the doctor one question.

“Listen, nearby, was there a…?”

“If you mean the corpse of that junkie scum, the syndicate men got rid of it.”

Apparently aware of what he wanted to know, the doctor gave the answer Christopher had anticipated before the question was out of his mouth.

“You now have a vast debt with the Russo Family, and they’ve got you over a barrel… Or you would be, but the situation with the junkie was a bit complicated, you see. Mr. Placido says he’ll forget about it.”

Oh, come to think of it, that guy was a stoolie who’d infiltrated the Russo Family, wasn’t he?

Recalling the man, already no more than a vague memory, Christopher thought for a little while. This time, he asked his question all the way to the end.

“Why did that Ricardo kid help me?”

“No idea. He doesn’t normally call on the syndicate, so he must have really wanted to help you… ‘Please save him,’ he said. ‘He’s my friend.’”

The doctor’s attitude was gruff, and that was all he said before he shrugged and left the hospital room.

Save me? Why?

His doubts were only growing deeper. However, deciding there was no point in thinking about this and that, Christopher concentrated on resting up.

Either way, he assumed he probably wouldn’t be here long.

The twins should find me and get in contact soon. Once that happens, I’ll just repay my favor to the boy, and that’ll be that.

This is all kind of fishy, but I’m glad somebody was so quick to call me a friend, I think.

After the doctor had gone, Ricardo stopped by the hospital room.

“Oh, Chris. You look like you’re doing a lot better.”

The relief was completely gone from the boy’s face, and he looked a bit sullen and unfriendly.

I guess I’d take him over Sickle, though.

Remembering his colleague, Christopher looked up at the boy from where he lay on the bed.

It didn’t seem as though anything was irritating him in particular. This was probably his default expression.

Without letting it bother him, Christopher struck up a conversation.

Ricardo was already calling him “Chris” and talking to him as if they were old friends, but as one with a similar habit, Christopher didn’t give it much thought. It might not even have struck him as strange.

“Oh. Right. Uh, you know. Thanks.”

“For what?”

As he asked the question, Ricardo’s expression didn’t change. Ordinarily, the response would have seemed odd, but Christopher immediately understood what the boy was trying to say, and he grinned.

“Both. For saving me, and for being friends with a guy like me.”

It wasn’t clear what the boy thought of the answer. He didn’t reply. Apparently, he wasn’t a terribly sociable type.

Christopher had been planning to observe Ricardo’s personality for a while, but the kid didn’t try to start any sort of conversation, and the odd silence formed a wall between them.

In the end, Christopher was the one who folded first and asked something he'd been wondering about.

"Say."

"Hmm… What?"

"Why did you help me? I'm not exactly trustworthy… I'm an inhuman, monstrous weirdo. And not only that, you agreed to be my friend right off the bat, even though we'd just met. As your friend, I should warn you not to trust a guy who says he wants to be friends out of the blue. It'll ruin your life."

There was no telling why he was enjoying it so much, but Christopher kept matter-of-factly sabotaging his own position.

The boy listened to the question and the advice quietly, and when he was done listening, he answered in brief.

"That's why."

It was a very short answer.

"?"

"That's why I saved you. I got the feeling that someone like you—you'd probably smash up every last bit of the world I hate. Me included."

He sounded indifferent.

Incredibly detached.

If he'd spoken tearfully, a listener could probably have grasped the circumstances, more or less. Even if he'd simply lowered his eyes, the words would likely have inspired the listener to imagine their own background for the boy, envisioning some deep reason behind them—But there was no emotion in the boy's answer. It was as if he was coolly reading from a prepared script.

However… Strangely, despite the total lack of emotion, the words didn't strike Christopher as false.

"I'm just trying to use you. That's why I made friends with you… Do you think less of me now?"

"No, I'm not averse to keeping things simple. Both symbiotic and parasitic relationships are fine examples of natural phenomena. There's no guarantee that friendship couldn't spring up between a sea slug and the tiny fish that live in its innards."

Smiling wryly, Christopher shook his head in mild chagrin.

"Listen, though. Just because you make friends with a circus clown, that doesn't mean he'll take you to Neverland, you know? …Well, hmm, I wonder. I seem to recall hearing that nothing is impossible for clowns. The Poet said something a long time ago. *Packed within the nose of a clown is Pandora's empty box*, or something like that… What do you suppose he meant?"

Ignoring Christopher's muttering to himself, Ricardo dryly went on.

"I didn't save you because you looked funny, Chris."

The boy checked to make sure there was no one else around. Then he continued, still sounding indifferent:

"A little while ago…you killed lots of our family's men, didn't you? I was watching."

"…"

One doubt had been cleared up, but a new one had taken its place.

"…You were watching?"

"It was you, and a strange Asian man. I watched you from a distance. I was scared then, so I hid the whole time."

“Did you tell your grandpa about that?”

“No. If I had, you probably wouldn’t be alive now,” Ricardo told him casually, and it didn’t sound like a demand for gratitude.

However, given what he was saying, gratitude was clearly called for.

“As to what I’m thinking…I’ll tell you about that later on, once we’ve gotten closer.”

Ricardo’s expression was still cold. Slowly, Christopher put out his right hand—and clamped it around the boy’s thin neck.

His bright red eyes blazed, and as he whispered, his mouth warped cruelly around his rows of fangs.

“You don’t think I might already be able to stand? That I might kill you in some horrific way in the name of ‘Destroying the evidence!’ and make my escape?”

However, even though the boy appeared to be in a little pain, his eyes were still calm as he rasped:

“…If you do…then that’s fine. I wouldn’t mind being killed by a friend.”

On hearing that, Christopher immediately let go of his throat, whistling in appreciation.

“Interesting. You’re fascinating. A completely different brand of weird from the Poet and Sickle. You might hit it off with Rail and Frank. If we get the chance, I’ll introduce you.”

“Thanks. Although I don’t know much about those people…”

“Hey, the more friends you have, the better. I’ll introduce you to my friend in New York later on, too. His name’s Firo. He acts cranky, but he’s a nice guy deep down, so you’ll get along better with him than with Chi or Leeza.”

“You’re terrible. I told you I use my friends, and you’re going to introduce me to yours?”

Ricardo’s expression had softened very slightly, and Christopher grinned broadly as he answered.

“Friends are meant to be used! Sometimes you use each other for free, and other times you pay; that’s what it’s all about. Even just feeling better because you talked to someone is a splendid example of the give-and-take.”

“…You know, you’re pretty energetic for somebody who’s injured.”

“It hurts quite a bit, though.”

As he made small talk with Ricardo, who’d smiled just a little, Christopher began to think that he wouldn’t mind staying with this boy for a while. Not because the kid had him in a vulnerable position, though. He’d simply thought, *This is interesting*.

Well, once Huey contacts me through the twins, I guess I can just give him some random excuse and slip out.

With that casual thought, Christopher was discharged from the hospital and taken into the Russo Family as Ricardo’s bodyguard. The Russo Family members were openly suspicious at first, but as they watched Ricardo interact with him without any trouble at all, they gradually stopped worrying.

It wasn’t that they’d accepted him. They just acted like he wasn’t really there.

They didn’t get many incidents that would have let Christopher display his abilities as a bodyguard, and time just passed, without giving him a chance to prove his skills.

And so a year went by…

There hadn’t been a single message from Huey.

He hadn’t heard any new information from Ricardo, either, and they continued to be nothing more than ordinary friends of widely different ages.

Today, once again, time ticked on.

Calmly. Indifferently.

And little by little, something ominous began stealing into the air.



CHAPTER 2

MISDIRECTED HYSTERIA

CHAPTER 2: MISDIRECTED HYSTERIA

1934 One day in December

Chicago Nebula headquarters building

It was in the heart of Chicago, amid a forest of towering skyscrapers.

The group of tall buildings hadn't been built at random but in planned, calculated rows. If you'd only heard about them, you would have pictured crude high-rise structures, but each building was the polished product of an architect's design, interesting and impressive to all who saw them.

From the center of the broad avenue, a vast winter sky was visible through the gaps between the buildings, and it harmonized surprisingly well with the rebar structures.

The company was located in the midst of those skyscrapers, in a business district that had been developed beside the Chicago River.

A short distance from the Wrigley Building and its beautiful, iconic clock tower, a building with pale-white walls soared into the sky.

It was the headquarters of the Nebula conglomerate.

Mist Wall, its branch office in New York, also had a distinctive white exterior, but this building was even paler. It seemed to fade in the sunlight, creating the illusion that it really was a tower of mist.

The Nebula Corporation had been established by Cal Muybridge just a few decades earlier. Originally, they had been something not unlike a band of showmen, a subsidiary that manufactured equipment for amusement parks and planned a wide variety of events.

However, Cal had wits as well as capital. He'd successfully bought up various companies and invested in stocks, and in an astonishingly

short period of time, his company had become a conglomerate with nationwide renown.

Its range of industries was truly diverse. They continued to operate amusement parks and host events as they'd originally done, but on a much grander scale. They also had hands in the grocery business, chemical engineering, the iron industry, and insurance, and they had recently ventured into publishing. There were rumors that they'd even gotten involved in the development of firearms, although, as one part of a huge corporation, the small scale of the operation made it a bit like a hobby.

It was said that, provided you had the ability, it was possible to become president of one of the internal companies in ten years. Due to the influence of the Great Depression, things were, unsurprisingly, quieter now than they had been in the past. But even in these times, they were an object of envy for entrepreneurs who dreamed of becoming an overnight success in the big city.

It was the American dream through and through.

In front of that symbolic building, a young girl was clutching a camera excitedly.

"Incredible… This is incredible, Vice President! Every single one of the window frames has a different carving! The bronze statue in front of the building is awfully keen, too!"

Before she'd arrived, the girl had painstakingly read up on the Nebula Corporation, but the moment she actually saw the towering work of art, everything she'd learned flew clean out of her head.

"I have heard that the building was constructed by Nebula's internal general contractors, based on the consolidated ideas of multiple architects. Granted, opinions regarding the decision not to hire an

individual architect are mixed. Incidentally, that bronze statue was designed and cast by the German artist Carnald Strassburg himself."

As he responded to the girl with the camera, a sharp-eyed man with a monocle stepped into the building.

"Aaah! Wait, Vice President, please! Let me just take one photo looking up at the building…"

"We already have a photograph from three months ago at headquarters. As it has not changed significantly in the meantime, there is no need to photograph it again. In addition, if you take one without permission, we might receive complaints afterward. Be careful."

"C-complaints?!"

Imagining a herd of lawyers descending on her with documents and seals, Carol—the girl with the camera—gave an involuntary yelp.

In answer, the vice president kept walking and lectured the girl, his attitude resolute.

"That isn't all. In this world, there's no telling what may happen, or when. Film must not be wasted. Knowledge regarding photography should be learned indoors, while technique is best acquired in the field."

"Ngh, I'm sorry…"

"Hmm… That said, this is my personal opinion. There may be others whose thoughts run entirely counter to it. A journalist worth her salt should hear as many opinions as she can and decide for herself. No matter how much the article changes due to external pressure, company policy, or your own convictions…hearing many opinions is beneficial in and of itself, by and large."

The vice president's speech was stiff and formal, but Carol nodded eagerly with a "Yes, sir!" and trotted after him, still holding her camera.

The two of them were on the staff of the DD newspaper, a small publisher in New York.

It was a humble company that issued the *Daily Days*, a local paper that didn't circulate outside New York City. That said, it also had another face as a distinguished information brokerage, and in that capacity, it enjoyed a covert fame outside its home state.

Carol, an apprentice at that company, very obviously seemed young enough that she should have been in school by law, but she hadn't told any of the people around her how old she actually was. Meanwhile, the age of the vice president—Gustav St. Germain—was even less clear than Carol's. However, due to their appearances, most people took them for father and daughter.

Unlike the company president, who specialized in deskbound work, the vice president of the DD newspaper was a firm believer in the hands-on approach. He actively zipped around the country, and sometimes around foreign countries, and he was rarely in the office for more than ten days a year.

His current journey had two objectives: to train the new photographer, and to visit and greet the DD newspaper personnel and informants scattered around every major city.

You never know when you're going to need film.

Carol's own experience underscored the vice president's advice, and it resonated with her strongly.

Ten days earlier, when they'd first arrived in this city, they'd wound up in the middle of a train robbery.

In the end, they'd made it through thanks to the vice president's quick thinking, but Carol had simply panicked and been no help at all, and she was ashamed of herself.

If I keep that up, I'll never be a proper journalist. I'll never, ever panic a…gain… aaaaAAaaAAh?!

"AAaaAAh?! Vice President! Vice President!"

"Compose yourself, Carol."

Carol was panicking, her gaze swimming, but the vice president admonished her in his dignified way.

"B-but… Just now— The man we just passed in the entrance…"

"Yes. Senator Manfred Beriam, I believe."

Carol turned back to check again and again, but the senator was already hidden at the center of his group of bodyguards, and she wasn't able to make out his back.

"Why do you sound so calm? Sir, that's…"

"It isn't as if we encountered the nation's president. There's no sense in losing your head over a senator or two."

As she looked at the profile of the unflappable vice president, Carol was reminded once again that her respect for her superior was more than justified.

Wow. The vice president never loses his *head.*

Feeling genuine adoration as a newspaper reporter, Carol calmed herself and changed the subject.

"Still, I'm impressed you have an acquaintance at such a big company. You really are amazing, Vice President!"

“The size of a company has no bearing on anything. No matter who the other party may be, they are a valuable business partner of the DD newspaper. Therefore, we must always treat them with the greatest respect, but as our equals. Never show subservience.”

“Yes, sir!”

As she imagined what her superior’s friend might be like, Carol stepped into the elevator with the vice president, feeling thrilled.

The elevator began to rise straight up without stopping.

It went past the floors with conference rooms and reception rooms.

Up and up and up—toward the very top floor.

⇔

Thirty minutes later The first-floor entrance hall

“Goodness… In terms of name recognition, Senator Beriam is more famous. If this is how things stand, I would say that you’re still at a mere three hundred and twenty-five points.”

“…’tta how many…?”

Instead of answering the question, the vice president only shook his head wearily and sat the stunned Carol down on a bench in the hall.

Carol’s pupils had shrunk to points, her knees had given out on her, and her mouth was flapping like a goldfish’s.

“Calm yourself. What about the presence of such a genial person could possibly provoke such a display of nerves?”

“I thidn’t dink… I—I mean, I didn’t think the pry, pruy…the president…would byuh…be…”

“He is not the president. Mr. Muybridge is the chairman. In addition, I know I have instructed you to call me St. Germain rather than ‘Vice President’ when we are in mixed company, and yet you repeatedly said ‘Vice President, Vice President…’ What if we had been conversing with the vice president of the other company?”

Gustav was telling Carol all this in a matter-of-fact way, but almost none of it got through to her.

The man Carol had seen in the simple rooftop garden (a lawn with benches) beyond the top floor was none other than one of the greatest success stories in the country, perhaps even the world: the chairman of Nebula himself.

She remembered everything up to the vice president’s candid exchange of pleasantries, but after the other man’s name had been mentioned, her memory was practically blank. Even Chairman Muybridge’s face had blurred and vanished.

On the other hand, when she saw the vice president wasn’t showing the slightest hint of nerves, Carol shook her head, white-faced.

Seriously, what is he…? As a trace of fear crept into her adoration, the vice president said he was going to “go buy some sort of beverage” and walked off.

Aaaah, not having him here is nerve-racking, too…

Realizing that she was hugging her camera, the novice reporter began to worry about what would happen if she was to encounter a thief under these circumstances. Her legs still weren’t working properly, so she wasn’t able to get up and run after the vice president, and she wound up all alone in the vast hall.

She figured there couldn’t possibly be thieves in a building like this one, but she wasn’t plucky enough to conduct herself confidently in an unfamiliar place.

Nnnngh…

Carol's pale face was turning even paler, but then—

All of a sudden, there was someone standing in front of her.

A doctor?

The first thing she saw was a bright white lab coat, and she thought she'd encountered some kind of physician.

Then, on noticing the distinctive contours of her body, she corrected her mistake with another one.

A lady doctor?

In the 1800s, America had produced Elizabeth Blackwell, a female doctor who had established a dispensary in New York in 1853 that was staffed entirely by women.

Due to that history, female doctors certainly weren't a rarity in this day and age. However, to Carol—who hadn't been in the care of doctors very often—they were relatively unusual.

Could the vice president have brought her out of consideration for Carol, since she seemed indisposed?

She regretted it if so, and she hastily pulled herself together.

"U-um! I'm all right! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

Her shout didn't make it clear what she was sorry for, but Carol was still confused and didn't stop.

It seemed to startle the other woman, who began vigorously apologizing right back at Carol, almost mimicking her.

"Huh?! U-um! I—I beg your pardon! I-I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

That was when Carol regained her composure, and she examined the distracted woman in white in front of her.

Above the lab coat, she wore black-rimmed glasses and a distracted expression, and long bangs hung loosely over her forehead. In contrast, the white coat encased a figure whose curves were rather too extreme, the sort that should have earned her the label of "model" or—in a different era—"Playmate."

Every time she bowed her head, her bosom—which asserted itself in spite of her drab clothes—came into view. Noticing, Carol nonchalantly thought, *Hmm. Those look like they'd be a pain. I'd rather mine didn't get that big.*

"Um, erm… I'm sorry. If you were sleeping, I didn't mean to wake you! It's just that you looked a little unwell, so I thought to myself, 'I wonder if she's all right' and came over, but then you suddenly jumped up and apologized, so I thought maybe I'd accidentally bumped your foot, and um, ummm…"

The woman in the lab coat apologized, her eyes darting behind her glasses. Sensing that they might be cut from the same cloth, Carol smiled and waved the apology away.

"Oh, no, that wasn't it! Um. I was just woolgathering, that's all; please don't worry about it! Really, I should be apologizing: I'm sorry!"

"Oh, is that what it was! I'm sorry; it looks like I worried more than I should have…"

"No, I should be saying that to you. I'm sorry."

"No, it was my fault…"

After they'd run through similar exchanges about a dozen times, Carol realized she wasn't tense anymore and laughed a little, in spite of herself.

“Ah-ha-ha! All we’ve been doing is apologizing. Um, thanks to you, I feel better somehow! Thank you very much!”

“Huh? You do?”

At Carol’s unexpected gratitude, the bespectacled woman in the lab coat stared blankly back for a moment, but then…

“Well, you do look as if you’ve cheered up. That’s wonderful!”

The woman smiled, almost as if she was the one who’d been encouraged. Carol’s tension dissolved completely, and she adopted a more childlike manner as she introduced herself.

“I’m Carol. I work as an assistant for a newspaper journalist, and we’re collecting information about the company. Are you a doctor who works out of this building, miss?”

“Huh? Um… Hmm, well, I do make medicines, but I’m not a doctor. Probably.”

Is she a pharmacist, then?

Come to think of it, one of Nebula’s companies did develop pharmaceuticals.

Carol was easily starstruck and curious by nature, and that was probably why she was about to ask more prying questions when—

“What are you doing?”

A dignified voice abruptly broke into their conversation. Both Carol and the woman in the lab coat froze up at the same time, then glanced in the direction of the speaker.

The vice president was standing there, holding a bottle of cola in one hand. His eyes, sharp as usual, were trained on the woman in the lab coat.

“Miss Renee… What are you doing? That girl is my assistant.”

“Oh, Mr. Gustav! Um, well…! I wasn’t thinking of kidnapping her and turning her into a guinea pig or anything like that, not really.”

“Vice President! …Uh, huh? Um… Do you know each other?”

Carol had taken the business about guinea pigs as a joke, and she spoke to the vice president with a smile.

“Mm… Not personally. She’s an acquaintance of our company president.”

“Huh?! The president?! That’s so neat!”

When Carol thought of the DD company president, all she could picture was someone buried in a pile of documents. She’d never even seen his face.

She wasn’t sure he ever left the company at all. Who’d have thought he was acquainted with such a beautiful, shapely woman!

True to her rubbernecking habits, Carol had gotten all excited and opened her mouth to continue her personal information-gathering—But before she could, the vice president addressed the woman he’d called Renee in his usual way.

“First of all, I assume you aren’t in this entrance hall by accident.”

“That’s right. I heard that information brokers from the DD newspaper were here, so I thought I’d at least come and say hello! That startled me, though; I didn’t think you’d have such an adorable information broker with you!”

“A-adorable… Oh, gee, I’m not really…”

Maybe the attention and the soft smile had embarrassed her: Carol looked down, flushing bright red. The possibility that the woman might simply be calling her a child didn’t occur to her. She just broke into a genuine smile.

Setting a hand lightly on Carol's head, the vice president coolly continued his conversation with Renee.

"Well, that aside. It looks as though Chairman Muybridge is still playing an active role. That's splendid. And what have you been doing lately?"

"Ah-ha-ha, oh, the usual. Failing experiments and causing trouble for everybody else."

"Were *those twelve hundred individuals in New York* a success or a failure?"

"Mm. I still can't say. After all, that isn't under my sole jurisdiction! We have to look at it comprehensively, and we're having lots of trouble from other angles, too. Homer is taking care of some things in New York, and even I'm in danger these days, so the Russo—"

"Wouldn't it be imprudent to reveal more than that to outsiders?"

The vice president had spoken sharply, and Renee gasped, hastily covering her mouth.

That's the first time I ever saw someone actually cover their mouth with their hand.

The meaning of the recent conversation seemed to have escaped Carol entirely. She just watched the woman, thinking she was quite klutzy, and felt rather fond of her. Renee gave an embarrassed smile acknowledging her mistake and poked gently at Carol's soft cheeks.

"Oh, honestly! That was close, wasn't it, sweetheart? Why, if I'd slipped and said more than that, I would have had to shut you up permanently, wouldn't I?!"

"Ah-ha-ha, yes, that was close."

Carol laughed at Renee's joke, the three of them made a little more small talk, and then they said their good-byes.

“All right, Miss Renee, do your best at work, okay?!”

“I will! You work hard, too, Car— Yeeeek?!”

Renee had been walking backward as she waved, until she tripped on a bench and fell over.

Scrambling to her feet, she waved again, red-faced, then scampered off at a trot.

From the lab coat and the glasses, you’d think she was an intellectual, but she’s actually a real scatterbrain. Carol watched her go, smiling, and then the two of them left as well. However…

The moment they stepped outside the building, the vice president murmured something odd.

“Did she truly do nothing to you?”

“Huh? What’s the matter, Vice President?”

“Hmm… Let me give you a word of advice: Be careful around her. Until you’ve acquired the expertise for how to interact with her, I would avoid being alone with her if I were you.”

“Huh? Why?”

Carol sounded mystified; she didn’t understand what he was trying to say.

However, the vice president walked awhile longer in silence. When they were in front of the Wrigley Building, near the bank of the Chicago River, he finally answered Carol, keeping his eyes focused ahead of him.

“Because when she said she would have had to shut us up permanently…it’s likely that she meant it.”

⟺

A few minutes earlier The Chicago River In front of the Wrigley Building

The building with the distinctive clock tower was the pride of one of America's leading chewing gum manufacturers. When you passed between this structure—the Wrigley Building—and the headquarters of the *Chicago Tribune*, you came out onto a bridge that spanned the Chicago River.

The bridge sat weightily over an expanse of water that was easily more than fifty yards wide, and it served as a broad avenue for both pedestrians and cars in large numbers. However, at a certain point, the people crossing the bridge registered two figures standing near the foot and gazing up at the clock tower on the building.

The passersby turned curious glances their way, but they also walked quickly past, doing their best not to interact.

The two targets of all this attention were children who looked like a couple of dolls.

One child was abnormally tall, with a physique resembling a beer barrel.

He had a backpack hanging near his waist, but his height made it look like a money pouch.

The figure that stood next to him belonged to a small, delicate boy with suture scars forming a geometrical pattern all over his body.

Even though it was winter, the boy had taken off his jacket and was wearing a sleeveless shirt, almost proudly exposing the black scars to the public eye.

With a lively expression, the scarred boy spit his chewed gum into its wrapper.

Then he spoke to the enormous child next to him, whose gaze was roaming around nervously.

“Gum’s pretty nifty, huh, Frank? You never get tired of chewing it.”

“Hmm. I like it, too, but it doesn’t feel like enough unless I chew ten pieces at once, so it gets expensive.”

“Don’t be such a tightwad; you can spend that much. Gum’s the ultimate food, you know? Look… See that building over there? They say that’s a gum company. Even if good ol’ Huey told us to burn the whole city to the ground, I’d protect that building, no matter what.”

“Y-yeah… Is that maybe why you chose this spot, specifically?”

The smaller boy was bold as brass about his ominous comment, and the big kid glanced around uneasily.

“L-listen. Never mind that now, Rail. I think everybody’s looking at us.”

“Well, sure. I wonder what’s got ’em so interested, my scars or your build. Scars aren’t all that unusual, I guess, but I bet it’s me… These suture scars look like somebody made ’em on purpose. They’re probably sympathizing or pitying me.”

“I—I don’t think anybody’s putting that much thought into it. I-is it really okay for us to stand out this much, though?”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Huey’s order not to draw attention doesn’t matter anymore. If we’re this conspicuous-looking, the enemy’s bound to notice us, whether they want to or not. Plus, if we’re only standing here, the cops shouldn’t try to question us. Well, if it’s too obvious and they think it’s a trap, that’ll be the end of it.”

Rail cackled, apparently enjoying himself as he made a suggestion.

“Oh, right. I thought of something good, Frank.”

“What?”

“Yesterday, I said our names wouldn’t go down in history, but…did you ever hear about the Comte de Saint-Germain, Frank?”

The name was very sudden, and Frank thought hard for a little while, then shook his head apologetically.

“Um… I don’t know him.”

“He lived in Europe, a long time ago. His name’s in the history books, but he’s famous for all the weird rumors about him. They say he time-slipped, or he’s immortal; things like that.”

“H-huh…”

“So listen, Frank! If we get to be that kind of famous, I bet we’ll go down in history, too. Just think: ‘Wherever those two appear, a huge, mysterious explosion always wipes the place off the map’!”

Rail’s eyes were shining with glee. Once again, Frank thought for a little while, but…

…before long, he spoke as if something had occurred to him.

“Th-that’s no good, Rail.”

“Why not?”

Rail sounded genuinely stumped, and Frank responded with a shake of his enormous head.

“I-if we did that, then there wouldn’t be anybody left to tell people they’d seen us.”

“Oh… I see. Yeah, you’re right! Ha! …Aaah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

The boy was grinning like a lunatic, and the people on the bridge put more distance between them as they passed by.

However, the situation abruptly changed.

As Rail and Frank stood there with nothing to do, a young girl's carefree laugh reached their ears.

At first, they thought she was laughing at them.

They were used to people curiously eyeing Rail's scars and Frank's size, but it was rare for anyone to actually laugh out loud. Intrigued but not particularly angry, Rail scanned the area, and then…

He spotted the mirthful girl walking toward them, holding a large camera.

Wha…? She's not just laughing, she's planning on taking a photo?!

This was something completely novel. Rail had already gone beyond thinking of his suture scars as unique and considered them a fashion statement, so he felt no particular resistance to the idea, although he did worry that Frank might be sensitive about his gigantic frame.

That said, acting as decoys on the bridge had been his idea, so he couldn't complain.

While Rail was thinking all this, the conversation between the girl and the monocled man beside her came into earshot. The girl was so focused on the man as she walked that, apparently, she hadn't even seen the two of them.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, honestly, Vice President! It isn't like you to joke around like that!"

"Hmm. It wasn't a joke. Well, if you wish to believe that, Carol, I have no right to stop you, but as your superior, I cannot stand by and allow you to walk into danger, either. What should we do, hmm…?"

When he heard the pair's conversation clearly, Rail's growing tension evaporated instantly.

Oh. So she wasn't laughing at us?

Besides, if she wasn't even looking at them, it made sense why she was coming straight toward them. She seemed to be simply keeping pace with the man in front of them.

Huh?

Noticing a contradiction, Rail glanced at the man next to the girl.

He was definitely heading their way, and he had to be able to see them, but he didn't seem the least bit concerned about Rail and Frank.

That was unusual, all by itself. With such sharp eyes, maybe he had to keep a cool head in absolutely any situation—a hitman or something like that?

While Rail was wondering about that, the vice president passed right in front of him, and the girl following him continued straight on, failing to notice Frank's enormous legs.

"Really, Vice President! How could getting caught by someone who looks so nice be dangerou— Eek?!"

There was a light *thump*, and the girl came to a sudden stop.

She'd run into Frank, who immediately shrank back in apology for obstructing traffic.

"Oh, I-I'm sorry."

"Ouch… E-excuse myeeep?!"

As the girl apologized, rubbing her nose, she looked up at the other party, then shrieked when she saw how big he was.

"Oh, maaan. You scared her, Frank."

Rail poked his head out from the shadow of the giant's legs.

"Eep?!"

At the sight of his scars, not unlike the ones on Frankenstein's monster, the girl screamed again.

Rail snickered in apparent amusement. Frank was flustered, and his troubled gaze flicked from Rail to the girl and back.

Then the man with the monocle, who'd been watching the scene unfold, walked over to join them. He pressed down lightly on the girl's head, stopping her screams.

"Don't run into people, through no fault of their own, and then shriek at them. It's rude, Carol."

"…—…—…"

Carol's breathing was still ragged, but the presence of the man beside her seemed to reassure her, and over the space of about ten seconds, it gradually returned to normal.

At the same time, her face blanched, maybe because she understood what she'd done, and she timidly bowed her head.

"Oh, I-I'm sorry…"

Throwing the girl a lifeline, the monocled man doffed his hat and took control of the situation.

"My companion has been terribly discourteous. I intend to lecture her thoroughly, so do forgive her, if you would."

"It's no problem. When I saw you, mister, I thought you looked like a hitman, so there's that."

"However, you did not run into me."

"…You know, I'm impressed you can just strike up a conversation."

The sutures drew up his lips into their usual smile, but Rail was looking up at the man in front of him in bewilderment.

The man with the monocle responded to Rail's incredulous remark.

"Hmm… If you are referring to your scars and his height, neither poses a significant obstacle to conversation for me. Naturally, I expect that does vary from person to person."

"Huh… Ordinary people usually give us weird looks."

"Among my associates, there is a doctor who hides worse scars than yours beneath his gray clothes. In addition, if you were alluding to the height of the fellow next to you, I know many other altitudinous individuals. While I have not had the pleasure of making his acquaintance directly, there is a young man named Robert who lives in the town of Alton in the south of this very state. He will be sixteen this year, and yet he has already attained a height of nearly eight feet, and I am told he continues to grow at a speed of approximately four inches per annum."

The aforementioned man's height would later set world records, and he would be just shy of nine feet tall when an illness took his life. The monocled man gazed dispassionately at Rail and Frank.

"I-is that right…?"

"…"

Frank sounded impressed. Rail still didn't look convinced, but before he could speak again, Carol's timid voice reached him.

"U-um… I'm really sorry about that. I ran into you, and then I even screamed…"

The girl had slung her camera over one shoulder, and she drooped dejectedly. Giving a little smile, Rail thumped her on the shoulders.

"C'mon, don't let it get you down. I mean, when I saw you just now, I thought you were a camera thief for a second."

“What?!”

“Kidding.”

The boy was wearing an impish grin, and for a moment, Carol blinked at him in amazement. Then she managed to both puff out her cheeks in annoyance and smile at the same time, which was no small feat.

“Oh, gosh…! That was mean.”

Carol’s anxiety had dissolved completely, and when her cheeks returned to normal, she gave a childlike smile and ducked her head again.

“I really am sorry. My name is Carol! As an apology for what just happened, won’t you come and eat with us?”

“Huh?”

This was a first for Rail; he’d never received a proposal like that one before.

First of all, since he’d obeyed Huey’s instructions not to stand out—like a dunce—he’d only rarely exposed his scars in public. For the same reason, except for when they were on a job, Frank had always stayed at Huey’s vacation home.

For a brief moment, Frank’s face lit up, but then it turned gloomy again almost immediately as he shook his head.

“N-no restaurant has chairs I could sit in.”

Carol didn’t let that bother her.

She seemed completely over her astonishment at Frank’s enormous body already, and she smiled with the innocence peculiar to children as she said in a somewhat precocious manner, “It’s all right! Let’s buy sandwiches, and we can sit in that nearby square to eat!”

“Are you sure? We’ll actually take you up on that, you know.”

“I—I eat a lot, so it’ll get expensive.”

Carol found herself on the receiving end of a mean-spirited smile and some hesitation, but she puffed out her chest with everything she had and spoke with utter confidence.

“Please don’t worry! He may not look like it, but Mr. St. Germain here is the vice president of a newspaper! He’s generous!”

“Hmm…”

As the subject of her boast, the man with the monocle put a hand to his chin and spoke in a calm voice.

“…Am I to infer that I will be paying for this?”

⇔

The Russo mansion

“All right, Miss Lua. If there’s anything else you want, just ask,” Ricardo Russo said calmly, then quietly closed the door to the room.

There were several rooms in this long hall, and he saw a Russo Family member sitting at the far end.

The man was the only one there, but when he left to use the bathroom, he always called someone else to take his place. They were careful never to leave the hall empty.

He’d crossed his legs and was reading a newspaper, but he was keeping a close eye on the situation down at this end over the pages.

Watching him, Christopher, who’d been waiting for Ricardo outside the room, yawned in apparent boredom.

The woman they'd just visited in that room was a "guest" named Lua.

Christopher thought that calling her a guest was pretty rich when she was obviously being held captive, but he didn't really sympathize with her.

He had no idea what sort of person she was. It would have been one thing if she'd shown signs of wanting to escape, but she showed no particular emotion at all.

Ricardo visited the room sometimes, acting as a sort of caretaker, but Christopher felt safe in assuming that there was almost no chance he'd be taken hostage.

"How long has it been since that doll got here? A week already?"

"Yeah. If I were her, I bet I wouldn't be able to take staying in a dreary room like that…"

"Oho, what's this? What do you plan to do with a gutless attitude like that? If they put you in the pen, you'll go nuts."

"It's fine."

Ricardo responded to Christopher's overly familiar taunt with his usual sullen expression.

"I don't plan to join the mafia—and our family will end with my grandpa's generation anyway."

"It will?"

"I told you before, but my dad and mom are already dead."

"Right, come to think of it, you did say something like that. What did they die of again?"

Christopher asked the question without any hesitation, and Ricardo answered it without any display of anger or sadness.

“A bomb. It blew them to bits, car and all.”

He’d related that fact far too easily. Unlike his tone, the information was terribly grave.

Ordinarily, it might have seemed like some sort of joke, but both his eyes and his family history made it clear that they were true.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You always say those things so casually. Shouldn’t you at least pretend to be upset? Not that I know much about any of that.”

“Not really. Asking for sympathy won’t bring my parents back.”

Even when he spoke about his parents’ deaths, Ricardo didn’t show much emotion. However, it did seem to make him think, and after his reply, silence fell for a little while.

The weight of the atmosphere didn’t really bother Christopher, but Ricardo tossed him a question in an attempt to change the mood.

“What about you, Chris? Any family?”

“If you mean blood relations, probably not. It’s more like I never had any to begin with, see… To be honest, I really have no idea how you feel about your folks being dead, and I’m not sure what to do about that. Still, people can see worlds they’ve never been to and experience powerful emotions through books and plays, so I’d like to believe that the time will come when I’ll be able to empathize. Well, to that end, I spend my time with a group that’s pretty much family to me. My dream is that, someday, when somebody asks me what’s important, I’ll be able to play innocent and say, ‘Family.’”

“What a hypocrite.”

“I’m a fake, so that suits me just fine… Although I don’t think you’ll really understand what I mean by that, Ricardo.”

As they turned a corner in the hall, the two of them continued their odd conversation.

He'd been here a year now, but Ricardo still hadn't told him much about his past, and Christopher had volunteered almost nothing about his own.

However, if he was asked, Christopher would answer once in a while without seeming to mind.

Either way, Ricardo had already witnessed a massacre at Christopher's hands in Chicago, so at this point, Christopher didn't find any sense in hiding anything. That said, when it came to homunculi and the liquor of immortality, there were a few things he'd kept quiet about.

"Oh, right. By 'family'…do you mean those people, Lamia or whatever it was?"

"Yes, well. Also, if it isn't too bold to say so, I'd like to become family to the Earth. But alas, we aren't blood kin."

"You say some weird things sometimes, Chris."

Ricardo was watching him with cold eyes, but Christopher responded with a smile.

"Is that so? My pal Chi told me everything I said was crazy."

"…And he stayed friends with you anyway. Chi's a really nice guy."

"That's what I think, too."

Speaking of Chi, I wonder what he's up to these days, Christopher thought, and as he did, Ricardo stopped, then jerked a thumb in the direction of the entryway.

"I think I'm going to go buy Miss Lua some new books. I haven't been to town in a while anyway, and I'd like to go."

“Good idea. She seems a little gloomy, and I bet books would suit her.”

As he answered, Christopher remembered that this would be the first time he’d left the house in quite a long time.

As a rule, his job was to act as Ricardo’s bodyguard. However, due to his appearance, he didn’t accompany him to and from school. Since Ricardo had refused to be dropped off and picked up, other family members watched over him from a distance.

However, when Ricardo went out on private errands like this, for the most part, he took Christopher along.

Once, Christopher had teased him: “If people see you walking with me, you may never manage to make friends, you know?”

But Ricardo had replied, “Just being the Russo grandkid is isolating enough already.”

As a result, the eccentric who was isolated from the world and the boy who was isolated from his surroundings had begun their odd season together. Christopher had never experienced a normal life before and found it rather boring, though not intensely unpleasant.

They almost never left the house, but he had witty, wordplay-filled conversations with Ricardo and read every book he could lay his hands on in the library, and that was diversion enough for him.

Hmm. Maybe the twins haven’t contacted me because I’m almost never in town.

The twins were the message runners for Huey’s subordinates.

Their role was to appear out of nowhere and transmit Huey’s words to the members working at their preferred side jobs in various places.

From what he had heard, they were a male and female pair named Sham and Hilton, but even Christopher couldn't begin to guess what sort of characters they actually were.

They were mysterious beings: If you called to them during important situations, they'd always respond, but the person who actually spoke would be different every time. During the Mist Wall incident, he'd heard they'd been able to get away safely because Sham had been there and helped them.

They were everywhere.

At least that was what Christopher had always thought, but naturally, there was no guarantee that they'd be all the way out on the outskirts of Chicago.

As a rule, Sham and Hilton were probably only in places that Huey had deemed important.

Or did they decide they're done with me?

In a way, his ability to handle this quiet life with no fights or mortal combat might be due to his utter defeat by a man who was a mere human. He couldn't do anything about it if people said he'd lost his touch as a hitman, and it was possible that even Huey and his comrades had abandoned him.

Even that thought didn't cause Christopher any real pain.

Well, it might be kind of nice to stay here and entertain myself by watching Ricardo grow up. Maybe I could help him out on the sly and turn him into a marvelous don.

"A mafioso after my own heart. Kind to Nature…good at singing…has powers of flight…able to lift a car with one arm…can savor a glass of wine in one hand while juggling thirteen mistresses…"

“…What are you talking about? I’m leaving.”

Ignoring Christopher’s muttering, Ricardo marched out the front door by himself.

Hastily, Christopher started to follow, but an imposing voice called to him.

“Where are you going, Christopher?”

When he turned back, there was Placido with a group of several subordinates.

“Master Ricardo says he’s going shopping. I’m going along to help.”

“I see…”

Christopher sounded a little less enthusiastic than he did when he talked with Ricardo, but Placido didn’t seem to have noticed the difference.

“I don’t know much about your skills…but if I were you, I’d assume you’re going to be busy real soon.”

“Uh-huh…”

“They’re letting a troublemaker out of the pen, see, and when that happens, he might come after Ricardo. If you let someone so much as scratch my grandchild, my flesh and blood, I’ll take a blazing-hot iron pipe and let you suffer the same wound a thousand times deeper. Remember that.”

“If you went a thousand times deeper, wouldn’t it punch straight through and set the house on fire?”

With a retort implying that Ricardo was his employer, not Placido, Christopher walked straight out the front door without turning to look back at his boss once.

One of Placido's men spoke to him, back in the entryway.

"Are you sure about letting young master Ricardo leave with a guy like that, boss…?"

"Hmph. Just let him be. I dunno why, but Ricardo refuses to warm up to anyone except that freak."

With a confident smile, Placido murmured to himself quietly.

"Besides… At this point, I'm more important than my grandkid."

His lips warped into a vivid expression, and he finished the rest of his thought silently.

The liquor of immortality.

As long as I have that, I'll even be able to conquer the end of my natural life.

When that happens…there won't be any use for descendants.

⇔

The Wrigley Building was divided into two structures—one north, one south—that were linked by a skyway partway up.

Below the skyway was a plaza that occupied the space between the buildings, serving as a resting place for the people traveling along the street.

After introducing themselves briefly, Carol's group of four had thought that Frank would be able to sit on the curb of one of the plaza's flower beds, so they'd gone there.

On the way, they'd procured their food by practically buying out a hot dog stand, after which Carol had gotten a lecture from the vice president as they made for the plaza.

“Good grief. Mind where you walk when you’re out on the avenue. Just try breaking your camera by pulling another stunt like that. As a photographer, you’d be lucky to get one hundred points.”

“As I keep asking, out of how many?”

“Out of 26,783,419.”

“If you’re going to give me realistic answers, don’t always do it at times like this!”

“Setting that aside, I will contact accounting and make sure they subtract the cost of these hot dogs from your wages. Keep it in mind.”

“Awwwwww…”

Behind Carol, who seemed to be on the verge of tears, Frank walked along with Rail on his shoulders.

Rail had seemed like a ball-jointed doll to begin with, and now he looked almost exactly like a ventriloquist’s dummy. As he sat on Frank’s shoulders, which were as wide as a chair, he felt as if he were talking a walk through the sky.

Frank seemed a little entertained as he spoke next to Rail’s ear.

“I—I wonder if I could make friends with Robert, that tall person they were talking about.”

“Huey’d never let you meet him.”

“I—I guess not, huh…”

Frank looked down dejectedly, and Rail chuckled.

“Well, never mind that. Christopher has be-my-friend-itis, and anybody who talks to him is automatically his friend.”

“Huh? But Christopher’s…”

“He’s alive.”

As Rail answered Frank, he was wearing an oddly confident smile.

“He’s absolutely alive. That guy looks about as close to a vampire as you can get, and if he kicked the bucket that easy, we would have been dead on that last job… Maybe all the way back at the lab.”

As he listened to that cheerful laugh, all Frank could do was nod.

A shudder ran through his shoulders, perhaps due to some unpleasant memories attached to the word *lab*, and Rail had to struggle to keep his balance.

Then, in an attempt to forget something, Frank deliberately changed the subject.

“B-but… Are you sure it’s really okay for us to take all those hot dogs?”

“Sure, it’s fine. You’re a big eater, Frank, so you need to take food when it’s offered. Besides, doesn’t this feel kinda like fate? We were just talking about St. Germain, and then we actually ran into a guy with the same name!”

As the pair conversed, they looked at the mountain of hot dogs in St. Germain’s arms with childlike, sparkling eyes.

However, Frank’s face turned glum again almost immediately, and he whispered to Rail.

“B-but listen, Rail. Those two are good people, I just know it.”

“? Well, yeah. I mean, they’re treating us to lunch.”

“W-we’re being decoys right now, so… If we’re with them, they’ll get roped into this, too.”

Remembering why they’d been standing on the bridge, Frank had grown worried for the other pair’s safety, despite their recent acquaintance. During his conversation with Rail before Carol and St.

Germain had come along, he hadn't sounded very concerned about others' well-being, but apparently, he was a more thoughtful type toward people he actually knew.

Meanwhile, Rail, who'd proposed wiping the town off the map, replied, "Seriously, it's fine. Just think about it, Frank. You think they'd attack us in broad daylight, bold as brass, in the middle of a crowd? If they have decent brains, I think they'll follow us back to our hideout tonight and attack when we're asleep. And when they try it, we'll take them out instead! It's not like we're going home with Carol and her buddy, so I doubt we'll end up causing them trouble. See?"

He seemed to be looking out for Carol, such as it was, but to Frank, the prediction seemed to have a remarkable number of holes in it. However, his nose caught a whiff of the hot dogs the pair in the lead were carrying, and instead of pursuing the matter further, Frank decided to fill his own stomach.

Immediately afterward, he'd be forced to realize that it had been the wrong decision.

It was true; Rail's plan was far from airtight. The biggest hole was…

…the fact that not everyone on the enemy's side had a decent brain.

⟺

Chicago River On the bridge

"It's this way, Mr. Graham."

"Prob'ly thinkin' it's another lovely Chicago day, huh?" Head lowered, Graham muttered in response to Shaft walking ahead of him. "How… How sad!"

“Aaaaaah— The fella goes into sad mode now of all times! And would you quit saying ‘sad’ out loud already?! What are you trying to do, hypnotize yourself?!”

As they crossed the bridge, several men yelped in distress.

Graham gazed up at the skyscrapers of Chicago from the center of the group. His half-closed eyes were filled with tears.

“Look… Look at the Wrigley Building, there on the left… The white terra-cotta on it just shines. It’s a beautiful building, yeah? Isn’t it?”

His tight voice was filled with concentrated emotion, but none of his friends were seriously listening to him.

They knew it was a waste of time.

“In contrast, there’s the Gothic beauty of the Tribune Tower, over there on the right! Aah… Aah… They’re each just as beautiful as the other! You can see two completely different buildings at the exact same time… It’s like two totally different eras fused with the town! It’s so sad… I mean, c’mon, it’s just way too sad!”

“…Why, exactly?” Shaft retorted involuntarily.

Graham’s desolate scream echoed in his ears.

“And the harmony with that blue sky is flawless! Perfect! I don’t know jack about art, and it even got me thinkin’, ‘Damn, that’s pretty,’ so you know it’s gotta be good! But, *but*! What do you think occurred to me after that?! I thought, ‘Now, those would be worth breaking’!! What is *wrong* with me?! I thought they were pretty, so why would I want to break them?! What kind of nihilist am I anyway?! Why am I imagining myself with a huge-ass wrench about ten yards long neatly taking those buildings apart?! What is this? Where the hell am I planning to go?! I need to apologize! I need to apologize to the people who live in those buildings and the people

who made them! Dammit… Is there anything sadder than confirming your own head is screwy?!”

“Right now, we’re probably a whole lot sadder than that…”

He wore blue coveralls and held an enormous wrench; he was a man screaming nonsense who could easily have gotten himself reported to the cops at any moment.

The people crossing the bridge gave him an even wider berth than they’d given Rail and Frank a little while ago, passing by without meeting his eyes.

⟺

The Wrigley Building Central plaza

“Oh my gosh… So you two were in a circus?!”

“Yep. We traveled all around the country. It’s ’cause Frank and I both look like this, see. Our parents sold us.”

“Oh no…”

“Oh, hey, we don’t care. Thanks to them, our lives are loads of fun now.”

Rail laughed merrily, and Carol believed the whopper completely. As she listened to the boy, her eyes earnest, she answered with guileless praise.

“That’s really amazing… You’re so cool! I wish I could be like you! Oh, um, if you wouldn’t mind, please let me interview you properly later on, for work!”

“Ah-ha-ha. Sure, if the owner says it’s okay. He’s a real fickle piece of work, though. He doesn’t give two hoots for your hurt feelings or anything like that, so I’d be careful if I were you.”

Visualizing Huey's face, Rail bad-mouthed him without reservation.

Frank kept stuffing his face with hot dogs, working his big jaws as much as he wanted, while the vice president only sipped black tea he'd purchased from the hot dog stand. This meant that Rail and Carol were the ones doing most of the talking.

In this short time, Carol seemed to have gotten completely used to the suture scars, and she looked Rail in the face as she talked to him.

Before long, possibly because Carol believed him far too honestly and he'd begun to feel guilty, Rail began to tell her about himself, incorporating just a little of the truth.

"See, at the circus, I'm in charge of the explosives."

"Huh? The…explosives?"

"That's right. There are all sorts of them, you know. For the human cannonball, say, and the flaming ring, and in the magic show where somebody escapes from a box that blows up. It's my job to stage it."

"Ooooh! Amazing… That's amazing! You're just about the same age as I am, but you're doing such an important job!"

Carol's eyes were shining even more brightly, and maybe the sight had put him in a good mood. Gradually, Rail introduced more of his real feelings into his story.

"The thing is, I like explosives. Well, I guess they raised me so I would, but…"

"Raised you?"

"Yeah, at the circus, I mean… And I actually do love explosives. Just think about it: They've got no name, just tiny little crystals, or drops of liquid, or thick, soft stuff like clay, and then, when something suddenly triggers them, they express themselves. Even though they

disappear before they ever get a name, when they catch fire and touch off an explosion, absolutely everybody turns and looks, right?"

Even though his voice was calm, Rail's expression seemed somehow radiant. The smile he wore wasn't his ironic one; it was genuine, from the bottom of his heart.

"And they really do disappear in an instant. I bet nobody bothers to remember what explosives are called. Still, in that moment when it happens, the memory of an explosion, the sound of it, the light—that's all branded into people's minds. Or…if they get hurt in the blast, they might have the scar their whole life."

"That example sounds a little dangerous."

"Ah-ha-ha, you're right."

Carol smiled wryly, and Rail beamed back at her.

"Rumor has it Chicago was once home to a bomb fiend who was like an artist. I guess, for now, my goal is to surpass her."

"A bomb fiend?"

"Yeah. It's really a lot like an urban legend. This girl had a magnificent way with bombs. When there was a building scheduled for demolition, she got in there before the wreckers did and brought it down in style… Or she did so many experiments with explosives in a rocky spot by the lake that she ended up changing the shape of the coastline and the map… And when she brought that building down, there was absolutely no damage to the buildings around it. She's amazing."

The story really did sound as if it had to be an urban legend, but Carol listened to it quite seriously. She hadn't been an information broker's assistant for a full year yet, but even so, during that time, she'd heard

and experienced an incredible number of odd tales, so she accepted the story of the bomb fiend as fairly plausible.

“It’s hard to tell whether that person is a nuisance or not.”

“Well, it didn’t make the papers, so it might be made-up. I’d like to meet her if I could, but…I don’t even know what she looks like.”

“Oh, in that case…”

Our newspaper might be able to find out.

Carol was about to tell him so, but before she could—

—a voice came between the two of them: heavy, gloomy, and ominous, yet resonant.

“Let me tell you a sad, sad story.”

“Huh…?”

Carol and Rail turned around at the same time and found a bright blue pillar standing there.

A young man in ultramarine coveralls was looking sorrowfully down at Rail and the others from beside the flower bed.

“If that bomb fiend is a doll who wears glasses over an eye patch…she’s not here anymore. That sister’s in New York now.”

“…Who’re you?” Rail asked suspiciously.

However, the man took up an enormous wrench that was hanging from his belt and spoke in a dramatic manner distinct from the Poet’s.

“What’s even sadder…is that, even if you try to go to New York, you’re gonna have to come with me first, so life truly just doesn’t go the way you want… That’s the sad, sad story.”

Don’t tell me… He’s the enemy?!

He'd never expected anyone would just walk up to them in broad daylight like this, and on top of that, the guy had drawn something that was clearly a weapon.

He hesitated, not sure how to respond—but Carol, sitting beside him, turned pale and shrieked.

"AAAaaaaaAAAH!"

She grabbed Rail's hand, yanked him to his feet, and dragged him into the vice president's shadow, tearing him away from the man in the coveralls.

Then, from her hiding place behind the vice president, she shouted.

"It's the train robber! V-Vice President! He's the train robber!"

The man in the coveralls looked at Carol and the vice president, fell to thinking for a little while, and then—

Before long, he smacked his hands together in recollection.

"Hmm…? Huh? Oh…hmm? What?"

⇔

Shaft and the rest of Graham's hangers-on whispered to one another about the situation as they watched from a distance, flustered.

("Hey… What do we do about this? Mr. Graham went and launched a suicide attack.")

("Yeah, plus he did it here, *when everybody was already eyeballing the big lug!")*

("That guy doesn't have the brains to tail people… And it gets uglier.")

Shaft was the only one who looked calm. He glanced at the other people accompanying the targets and sighed.

“I told you we did a train job on our way here, right?”

“Huh? Yeah.”

“Mr. Graham aside… We tried to take money from that guy with the monocle. Once.”

“…And?”

Several of the people who’d witnessed it firsthand were watching the monocled man, and their faces were pale. That alone was enough to give a good idea of the answer, but one member of the group found it a bit hard to believe, so he went ahead and asked anyway.

However, the answer he got back was exactly what he’d thought it would be. Shaft rubbed his jaw, remembering the pain from back then.

“He took us out. Everybody except Mr. Graham, and it only took a few seconds… For the sake of our honor, lemme tell you… That guy has to know jujitsu or something.

“Not only that, but he and Mr. Graham seemed to hit it off… Well, I guess you could say they’re acquainted, sort of.”

⟺

Meanwhile, on seeing the two journalists he’d encountered about ten days ago, Graham twirled his wrench, looking mystified.

“What is this? And here I was wondering who you were. What are the information brokers from the train doing here? D-don’t tell me you two are the Poet and Sickle… Wait, are you? They say the culprit in a mystery novel is usually the last one you’d suspect. Are you journalists and information brokers secretly that Huey jerk’s flunkies?”

As he spoke, he took a paper out of his jacket and glanced at it, comparing it with the quartet.

“Well, the wanted poster mentions a ‘dramatic speaker,’ and that could technically fit the old guy… Then can you use capoeira, little girl? Hey, show me some capoeira.”

“Wh-what’s capoeira?! I don’t know anything like that!”

The statement hadn’t made any sense to her, and Carol shouted back an honest answer, even though her shoulders were shaking.

“Whaaat?! You’re a capoeira user, but you don’t know what capoeira is? What is this mystery? I see… They say riding a bicycle is experience, not knowledge; is that the kind of thing you mean? No, no, wait, I lied. I was actually about halfway sure it wasn’t that… But why couldn’t I just admit it? What was in it for me? What was in it for anyone?! Huh, little girl?!”

“I’m not really the person to ask!!”

Trembling at the unjust, shouted accusation, Carol hid in the vice president’s shadow.

Meanwhile, the two who did appear to be definite matches for the wanted poster were each exhibiting a different reaction.

The one who looked like a big kid seemed bewildered, glancing between the smaller boy and the others, while the boy was glaring at Graham with sheer hatred.

Don’t call me that bastard’s flunky!

Unusually for him, Rail was furious, but he didn’t put it into words.

From the things Carol had just shouted, although the details weren’t clear, apparently the guy in front of them was some sort of robber.

So why would a robber have our wanted poster?

As he gradually regained his composure, Rail reviewed what he knew about the situation.

Considering his recent exchange with Carol, it was clear that the guy wasn't terribly bright. He might really be just a thug.

In that case, did it mean the enemy looking for them had passed the wanted poster all the way down to punks like this and had them hunting at random?

If they tortured this dim-looking hood for the moment, would they be able to get him to cough up the name of the outfit that had given him the wanted poster, at least? Meekly going with him was an option as well, but if there were lots of people waiting for them at their destination with tommy guns, Rail and Frank would have no chance of winning.

If only Christopher were here. Or at least Chi or Leeza. If they were, machine guns wouldn't scare me.

Okay, I've made up my mind.

Rail's thoughts had been going around in circles, but he'd hit on a conclusion he could work with.

We'll make like we're going with him, and on the way, we'll thrash him within an inch of his life, then take him to the Poet and the gang.

The guy was just a thug, and he couldn't have much going for him.

Working from that assumption, Rail began to speak. He was wearing his usual sarcastic smile.

"What if we say we don't want to?"

"I won't let you say something that sad."

The thug in the coveralls shook his head, leveling his wrench. Rail sighed in exasperation, then taunted him.

“Don’t glare at me like that, mister. We’ll go with you. We just have to go, right? Frank!” Rail said.

Frank hastily gulped down the hot dog he’d had in his mouth. Then he scooped Rail up, easily lifting him to his shoulder.

“R-Rail… Frank…”

Carol hadn’t managed to process the situation, and she was gazing anxiously at the two of them.

Rail gave the girl a somewhat melancholy smile, then giggled and said good-bye.

“Oh, Carol. Really, thanks for today. It wasn’t for long, but it’s been ages since I got to chat with a normal kid like you. Maybe even the first time.”

“Th-the hot dogs were yummy, too.”

After the one-sided expression of thanks, Rail looked down, thinking for just a little, and then—

Lowering his voice, he murmured one more brief comment to Carol and the vice president.

“You could call this a warning, I guess. It’s, well, not easy to say, but…”

He didn’t know the specific content of the job, but he’d been called in, and the thought of the implications led him to speak out of concern for the girl.

“…if I were you, I’d get out of Chicago, fast.”

“See, there might be a big explosion around here or something.”



The man in the blue coveralls left with Rail and Frank; helplessly, Carol watched them go.

She'd hesitated, wondering whether to stop them or call somebody, but Rail had smiled and said "No, it's fine," and in the end, she hadn't been able to do a thing.



“Vice President…,” she’d tried, asking for help, but…

“Hmm. They agreed to go voluntarily, so I doubt there’s any way to stop them. Had they protested, I would not casually overlook it. However, they do appear to have their own motives. If you are still unconvinced, would you like to go with them?”

“B-but…”

“If you lack the determination for that, then report on the affair from a distance as a journalist. Naturally, some journalists go to the front line in pursuit of a more incisive truth. Interpretations of what constitutes an ideal journalistic mind-set must be left to the sensibilities and convictions of individuals. Of course, I would prefer to avoid convictions that are clearly harmful to the company.”

The vice president replied indifferently. However, as he gazed after Frank’s big body, which was already growing hazy with distance, he had a little compassion for Carol, though he was calm to the end.

“…Well, I doubt they’ll have their way with those two easily.”

“Huh?”

“All right. Carol, we will be staying in Chicago for a little while.”

“Wait… What are you saying? I mean, weren’t we scheduled to go back to New York tomorrow?”

Could he be planning to save those two?!

A faint hope that someone else would take care of it, like a civilian to a superhero, swelled inside Carol, but the vice president’s eyes were still as sharp as a hitman’s, and…

“I have a hunch that something is about to happen. It will be amusing to let ourselves get involved before returning to New York.”

“…Isn’t that different from what you said earlier?”

“I am the type who puts himself on the front line, you see. However, there’s no guarantee that following those two would put us there,” the vice president answered with absolutely no hesitation.

As Carol responded, she broke out in a cold sweat.

“Um… Isn’t this when you’re supposed to say, ‘You go on home, before you get involved in something dangerous’?”

“Did you want me to say it?”

“Of course not!”

Carol quelled the brief burst of fear by answering in a loud voice to motivate herself.

Quietly, the vice president spoke to the apprentice journalist.

“Hmm. I did indeed consider telling you to go home, but I determined that, under the present circumstances, sending you off on your own would be more dangerous.”

“?”

Carol was about to ask what he meant, but before she could put the question into words, the answer presented itself in a way that was impossible to ignore.

As the people nearby focused on the receding Frank and Rail, one man slowly lowered himself to sit beside Carol.

The man had a scar on his cheek; he was someone clearly not on the level. He dexterously opened a newspaper with one hand.

Then, in the space between the paper and his body, he casually opened his jacket with his free hand—and flashed a glossy black handgun so that only Carol and the vice president could see it.

“…Come with me for a bit.”

The man's demand was dispassionate. He kept his eyes trained on the newspaper.

"If you have nothing to do with those guys…"

Then he'll let us go? B-but if that happened, I'd still worry about Rail and Frank…

That was the thought on Carol's mind when she heard what Krieck said, but her worry was completely off base.

Krieck took the cigarette from his mouth and tossed it onto the ground, then spat out the rest of his sentence with a sadistic smile.

"…call it bad luck and give up."

"V-Vice President…"

In response to Carol's frightened voice, the vice president spoke as calmly as ever. Evidently, he was going to allow himself to be apprehended without a struggle.

"Carol. Let us hope that that the spirit behind your 'Of course not' earlier will hold until the incident has actually occurred."

Then, with a rare, ironic smile, the vice president murmured something so softly that only Carol could hear.

A comment that would plunge the girl, who was still quite young, into an even greater maelstrom of unease…

"After all, it is likely that a matter this trivial will not even qualify as part of the incident."

⟺

"So how far are we going, Mr. Blue?"

Once they'd gone quite a ways from the Wrigley Building, just as they entered an alley with very little traffic, Rail took the opportunity to speak up.

At first, the man in the blue coveralls had been alone. However, by the time they'd left the vicinity of the Wrigley Building, the group had grown, and before they realized it, Rail and Frank had been surrounded by five or six men.

The man in blue stopped dead, then answered, whirling around to face the boy in an exaggerated motion.

"Sadly, from what I hear, I'm not allowed to tell you for any reason. On the other hand, though, I can say this. My name is Graham. Graham Specter."

"Uh, nobody asked about your crummy name."

"Aah, too bad, you don't seem interested in me! However! When I think of what I'm about to do to you people, I really should introduce myself!"

"Wh-what are you planning to do?"

In response to Frank's uneasy question, Graham smacked his wrench against his shoulders.

"You two, Rail and Frank… Those actually are your names, right?"

"Yes. Although we don't have family names."

When Rail answered with a masochistic smile, Graham nodded to himself several times.

"I see… Good. If I'd found myself with a case of mistaken identity on my hands now, I woulda been up a creek."

"And? What does that have to do with giving your name?"

“It’s rude to ask someone’s name before introducing yourself, ain’t it? If you went out of your way to ask me something so basic, you really must think I’m nuts… Do you? Is it the clothes? Are these bright-blue coveralls to blame?! Do people think I’m suspicious, sad, repulsive because I wear this outfit all the time, even when I’m in town or taking a day off? I wash it every day, you know, and I’ve got three different ones that I wear in rotation!”

It was both a simple answer and a ridiculous one.

Immediately afterward, Graham begin spouting off all by himself. For a moment, Rail stared blankly, but soon after, he began smiling in amusement and heckling him.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Mister, you’re pretty polite for a guy who’s smack in the middle of kidnapping somebody.”

“Kidnapping? Yeah, kidnapping… Is that how you’re taking this? As a matter of fact, though, there’s no way around it, no matter what you call this! Arbitrarily dragging you around without an explanation *is* kidnapping, plain and simple… Aah, have I finally fallen as low as I can fall? Did I fall?! Am I falling? Where to? Into hell? But who decided hell is underground?! Isn’t that mind-set incredibly rude to the ground and everything beneath it?! Just think about it: People used to think that the Earth was the center of things, and that the universe revolved around it. If that’s true, it means when you’ve fallen as far as you can fall, you’re at the center of the Earth! Mind-blowing… Did the Earth revolve around hell, long ago? What a deep story… And a sad one. So very sad…”

Graham was completely off in his own world.

The young man in the coveralls had fallen to his knees and started crying. Rail set a hand lightly on his shoulder, speaking to him in a comforting and very unchildlike voice.

“It’s all right, mister. It’s okay if it’s sad. We’ll forgive you.”

“Ngh… The idea of getting forgiven by a little kid makes me feel like I’m gonna fall further and further into this hell of sadness. I’m grateful, though. Thanks…”

“It’s fine. You’re not sad at all, mister.”

Rail shook his head slowly. Then, he continued as if it was the natural next step in the conversation.

“So… Who told you to take us away?”

“No matter who told me, it’s still sad… Besides, I’m even sadder because you thought I’d sing over a cheap trick like that! What is this? Why must this sorrow torment me?!”

“Ah-ha-ha. Yeah, I guess you wouldn’t fall for that one, huh?”

Smiling like a mischievous kid, Rail stuck his tongue out lightly.

Then, as his tongue slipped back into his mouth, something malicious stole into his smile.

“All right, that’s fine. We’ll just get it out of you by force.”

“Hunh?”

As Graham raised his head, Rail snapped his fingers and called to Frank, who was standing behind him.

“Frank, *let’s get started*.”

“O-okay. All right.”

The giant child gave an exaggerated nod, and then—

With no hesitation, he kicked the kneeling Graham off the pavement.

“Ghk…!”

The impact had struck without warning, and Graham almost bit his tongue.

What?! What'd he do to me?!

The shock had hit him abruptly from the side, and it immediately traveled through his whole body, violently shaking his bones and tissues.

Next, Graham felt like he was falling, but strangely.

Huh? I... I'm falling sideways*?*

The moment it crossed his mind, a second impact landed.

Graham had been dashed against the side of a building, and as he slid down the wall, he focused his eyes on the scene unfolding before him.

What he saw was Frank, who had apparently kicked him into the air and now seemed to be the same size as a normal kid. That was when he first realized that he'd flown a very long way.

Just how far…did he kick me?

"Wh-why, you little…!"

The kick had been less resistance and more a surprise attack, and Graham's thuggish companions all yelled.

Some of them took knives from their jackets, but Rail gazed at the sight as if it entertained him. Once again, he called to Frank, behind him.

"I think you'd be fine on your own, Frank, but I'll get ready, too, just in case. Get my stuff."

"O-okay."

Frank obediently put a hand to his waist, took the backpack from his belt, and held it out to Rail.

The backpack looked pretty big in Rail's small arms. The boy took out a coat, then began slipping it on in a gesture that could have qualified as elegant.

Of course, even as they were doing this, a man with a knife was sprinting toward them.

"Hey bastards, you think you've got that kinda ti— AAAAaaaa aah

Partway through his sentence, the man heard a *smack*, and his mind soared clean away.

Frank's massive hand had knocked him into the air, and his body spun neatly, then hit the ground.

At that shocking sight, the men surrounding them all froze at once. They had the numerical advantage, but in their current situation, numbers meant absolutely nothing.

They didn't take to their heels, though. The men closed in warily, slowly shrinking the perimeter around the boys.

"I—I think we should probably get a little distance."

"Right. Go for it," Rail murmured, still getting into his coat.

Frank picked him up easily—

And on legs like the ends of tree trunks, lightly launched himself off the ground.

A wind whipped through the area.

And an enormous shadow slipped between the men, skimming just above the ground like a huge cannonball.

By the time they turned back to look, their eyes wide with astonishment, Frank was already setting Rail down on the ground, twenty yards away.

“Wha…?”

The men who’d witnessed that gigantic shape racing through the alley couldn’t believe their eyes.

At the same time, they realized that, with both the kick and the slap from Frank a moment ago—they hadn’t seen either one.

They felt as if they’d witnessed a monstrous speed too fast for the eye, so great that they hadn’t sensed the weight of that massive shape at all. In fact, the entire body had seemed like an enormous engine.

Big meant sluggish.

The men had been tripped up by that assumption, and all they could do was stand there and stare, mouths gaping uselessly.

At the sight of this parade of the abnormal, the handful of passersby had either made a run for it or were watching the shifting situation, paralyzed with fright.

At the same time, their eyes went to Rail, who’d finished changing.

The design of the coat he’d put on was similar to coveralls, with lots of pockets, but two things clearly distinguished it from what Graham wore.

As for its shape, Rail’s garment had long sleeves, opened at the front, and covered him to a point just below the knees, like a doctor’s lab coat.

The other difference was its color.

The surface of the coat sparkled, reflecting the light as if it had been woven from silver thread. It made the already doll-like Rail look even more like a work of art in a box garden.

“Surprised?”

The boy flashed a bright, cruel smile from the depths of his hood, and his expression seemed somehow rapturous as he spoke.

For a moment, the men thought the boy was referring to his clothes. However, what he said next was completely different.

“You were startled by how fast Frank is, weren’t you? You just paid attention to his build and the way he talks, and you figured he was dumb, right? Ha-ha! Prejudice is a scary thing!”

Then the men remembered.

Frank had moved in a nearly unbelievable way, just a few seconds earlier.

Rail laughed lightly, seemingly amused by the gulps of their would-be kidnappers, then veered off topic.

“But come on, isn’t that weird? In the ocean, sharks are big, and they swim pretty fast. Did you know that even alligators can run at thirty miles per hour if they get serious about it? Rabbits are supposed to be nimble and quick, but they get done in by the claws of tigers and lions that are dozens of times heavier than they are. So why would you look at Frank and think that being heavy is the same as being slow?! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

He laughed. And laughed. And laughed.

After he’d cackled for a while, rattling on and on about things that might have meant something, or might not, he abruptly stopped and spoke, twisting his lips into a brutal smile.

“Do you reeeeeeeeally not know why I’m chatting away like this?”

The sequence of events had left Graham’s friends unable to move, but at Rail’s words, they shared an involuntary glance—and then they noticed the sense of wrongness around them.

In the center of their circle…

A strange object lay on the ground, right where Rail and Frank had been standing a moment ago.

A pocket watch with a warped objet d’art attached to it.

That was the only way to describe the thing, which was about the size of a chicken egg. However, the eerie ticking of the clock stuck to its surface plunged the men into indescribable anxiety.

Indifferent, Rail murmured to the men to give their unease tangible form.

“See, the only one we need to torture is Mr. Graham over there, so…”

Behind Rail and his smirk, Frank had covered his ears and was trembling hard.

“For now…I’m gonna blow you people away.”

Just then, the clock’s second hand ticked to twelve, and—

—the blue sky between the buildings of the Chicago back alley was rent by a heavy, piercing blast.

INTERLUDE I

MISCHIEF BELOW ALCATRAZ ISLAND



INTERLUDE I: MISCHIEF BELOW ALCATRAZ ISLAND

The federal prison on Alcatraz Island was said to be inescapable.

The island was generally a collection of prisoners who'd caused trouble already, and the especially difficult prisoners among those were sent to special cells known as the Dungeon.

These cells were a relic of the structure's days as a fortress. They were enclosed in brick, and there wasn't any light in them at all. The troublemakers were flung into that darkness.

The brick walls were fragile compared to concrete, creating a possibility that someone could dig a tunnel and escape, or so they said. As a result, prisoners' legs were fully chained in the darkness.

Even farther underground, below that darkness, in the heart of the prison, in a location not marked on any of the plans in the facility—

—*he* and *she* were there.

It was a special cell that had technically been built for just one man. There were rumors that it had originally been a hidden storeroom for the fortress, or a space to hide noncombatant VIPs, but no one knew the specifics.

It was about the size of a modest hotel room; far too spacious for a cell.

As if in exchange, the only facilities in the room were minimal—a bed and a water tap—and as in the other cells, the only small articles in sight were things like soap and a tin cup. Unlike in the Dungeon, however, an electric bulb shone brightly, somewhat staving off insanity.

In this area, to which even prison guards were admitted only rarely—

—was Leeza Laforet, a small girl who clearly shouldn't be here, yet secretly was.

Now that Huey, the original prisoner, had been joined by this spirited little girl, the size of the room felt just about right.

However, when you considered that this was a prison, she struck a sharp contrast with the rest of the picture.

As if to remind him she was there, the girl spoke, her childlike words and voice echoing in the cell.

"Say, Father? How long are you going to let Rail get away with that?"

Huey Laforet, her father, was sitting in the room's chair, and he responded to Leeza with a faint smile.

"What do you mean, 'how long'?"

"Playing decoy and drawing attention without permission right this minute, and yesterday, he said lots and lots of bad things about you, Father! Can I kill him, pleeease? Can I?"

Leeza wheedled like a child pestering someone for sweets, tugging on Huey's clothes.

However, Huey stroked her head lightly and admonished her. He was still wearing that thin smile.

"No, Leeza, you may not. He's your valuable companion."

"Companion, my foot."

"Then let me put it another way."

At that point, he paused, and his smile grew even softer.

"He's my valuable research subject. You mustn't break him without permission, Leeza."

“Ngh… But…”

“Besides, he’s growing, too. He may become more genial and begin to flatter me, you know.”

He sounded amused, but the emotion in his smile said he’d never expected him to do any such thing.

Quietly getting to his feet, Huey asked Leeza about the present situation.

“All the members have gathered in Chicago, then?”

“Uh-huh! Although we still haven’t found Chris…”

“Unfortunately, since he’s been out of contact for a full year, it may be best to give up on him.”

“You’re right.”

They discussed him as if he were a missing ballpoint pen, and it didn’t strike either of them as odd.

Putting an end to the objectifying conversation about Christopher, Huey calmly turned to their upcoming schedule.

“I’m told the immortal Victor sent in will be arriving on the island soon. I intend to summon him down here before long, but…first, I think it would be best if we began as well. Victor and his associates seem to have latched onto the decoy in New York, so…once things are settled, let’s begin the experiment.”

He didn’t go into what he meant by “the experiment,” but Leeza nodded vigorously, and her face seemed to say that she understood completely.

Meanwhile, she wasn’t finished complaining about Rail.

“But Rail really doesn’t know his place! He was about to cry when we found out that Chris was gone, but he still won’t stop bad-mouthing you, Father!”

“That’s because I did some terrible things to him, and the ones who took care of him afterward were Christopher, Frank, and Adele. Christopher seems to be the one who conversed with him the most.”

“Lately, he’s even started talking a little like Chris. It’s seriously irritating.”

“Rail is still a child, after all. I expect he’s easily influenced simply by interacting with people.”

Sounding vaguely pleased as he answered, Huey sat down in the chair and closed his eyes.

Thinking of the boy covered in suture scars, he began to relate his own thoughts without any change in his expression.

“If he becomes more human in meeting people, then that is a consequence as well… Even if he says he doesn’t want to work with explosives anymore at some point in the future, I won’t be angry. I’ll just create someone *else* to replace him.”

“But, but then, Father, if that happens, you won’t get mad if I kill the useless little thing, will you?”

“Leeza. When you speak of killing people, it’s always best to be prepared to be destroyed instead.”

For a lecture directed at his own daughter, the words seemed far too detached.

In response to Huey’s scolding, Leeza puffed out her cheeks crossly and argued, “…I wouldn’t lose to a guy like him. It’s easy: I’ll just get him in the back with one of my rings!”

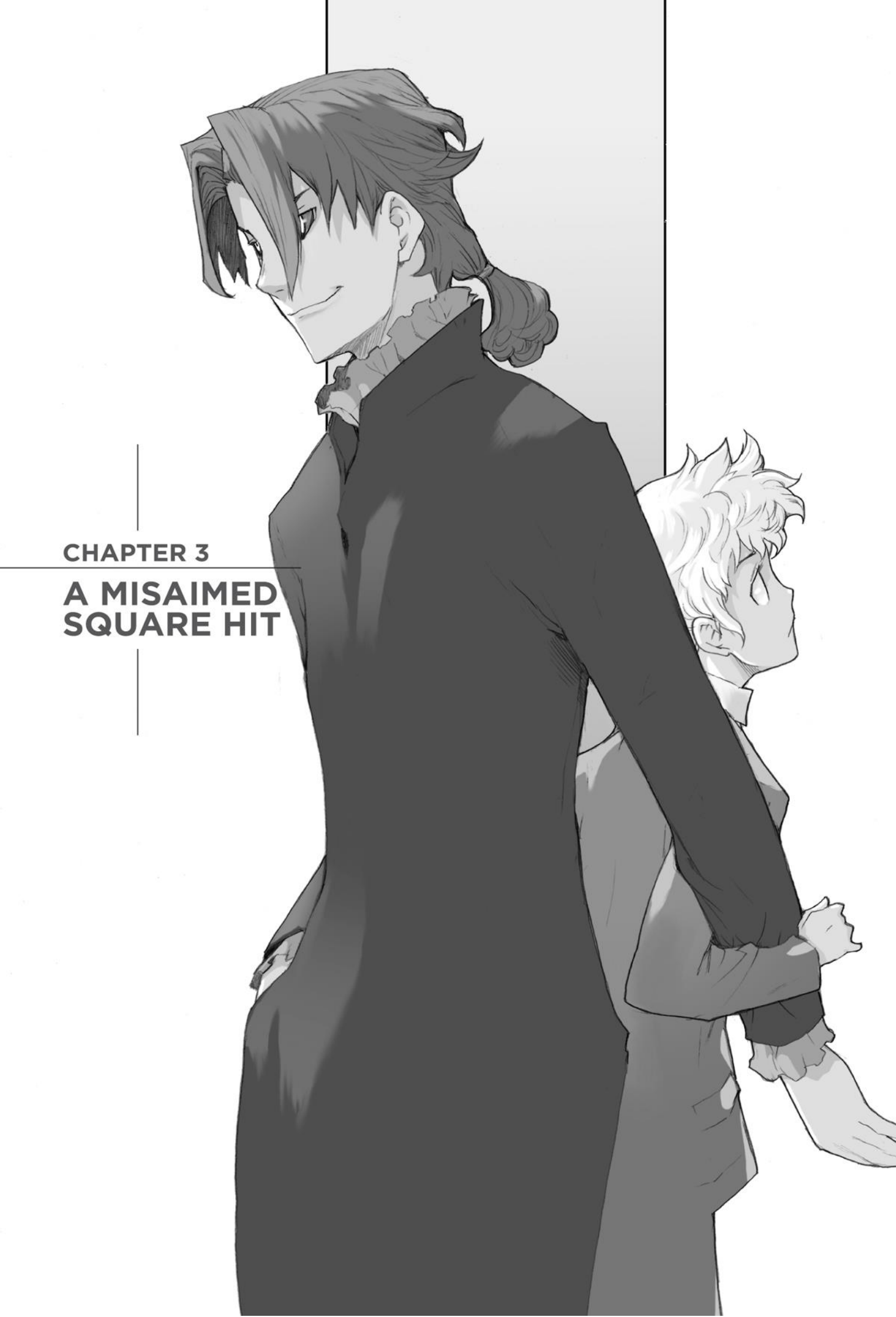
“There’s no guarantee that it would be that simple.”

Still smiling, Huey admonished his daughter gently.

“I believe you have the strength to drive off an ordinary enemy. That is precisely why I granted you and the others the name Lamia.”

However, at the end, he abruptly began to brood—and added one more remark.

“That said… Encounters with anyone extraordinary weren’t included in my calculations.”



CHAPTER 3

A MISAIMED SQUARE HIT

CHAPTER 3: A MISAIMED SQUARE HIT

Somewhere in Chicago

In front of a bookstore on a wide avenue that ran beside the Chicago River…

Ricardo finished his shopping quickly and climbed into the Ford with Christopher in the driver's seat.

"Thanks for waiting."

"I sure did. I wanted to go in with you. Plus, I'm your bodyguard, so wouldn't going along be the normal thing to do?"

"I don't intend to obstruct business at that bookstore," Ricardo said from the back seat.

It was the sort of joke you'd say to someone you were friendly with, but the boy's sullen expression kept the remark from coming across that way.

Christopher shook his head with an exaggerated "You wound me!" but a natural smile stole onto his face. "You're so mean, Ricardo. Is that the sort of thing you'd say to a friend?"

"Don't trust anyone who makes a big deal about being friends. You were the one who told me that, remember, Chris?"

"Yes! In other words, you need to doubt what I tell you! And since I said, 'Don't trust a guy who says he's your friend,' that means you should doubt it and form your own conclusions!"

Christopher laughed, setting the car in motion, and Ricardo put in a retort without missing a beat.

“I did think it over, and I’ve decided that you really can’t trust anyone who wants to be friends with someone he just met. There’s no doubt about it.”

“Be a little unsure, all right? Working through uncertainty makes you stronger.”

For a little while, Ricardo’s only response to Christopher was silence. Then, when the car had begun to pick up speed, he abruptly raised his head and spoke with an expression that was more serious than usual.

“Say, Chris. Would you just drive around at random for a little while?”

“? Sure. What’s this? We’re going for a drive? In that case, want to go to Lincoln Park, or maybe Grant Park? Being among Nature really is best. I think driving a product like this car, a symbol of the power of human industry, through an abundant natural environment strikes a good balance. Driving something artificial in the midst of other man-made things harmonizes much too well, and it’s just silly.”

“Like you, Chris?”

“…You’re awfully sharp sometimes, Ricardo.”

During the course of their year together, Christopher had never revealed the secret about his body, but Ricardo seemed to have sensed something peculiar in the way he spoke and moved.

Sometimes he made probing comments like this one, and when he did, Christopher always responded in the same way.

“If you’ll tell me what’s on your mind, I’ll tell you my secret. Gladly.”

Ricardo always backed down with an easy “I don’t trust you that much,” but—

Today, for some reason, he gave a different answer.

“Fine.”

“Huh?”

The reply was unexpected, and Christopher examined the boy’s face in the rearview mirror.

He looked as expressionless as always, but on closer inspection, his eyes were more downcast than usual, and he seemed somehow tense.

“When I saved you…I told you that I wanted you to break everything around me, didn’t I?”

“Huh? Oh, uh-huh.”

“Back then…a lot of things had happened. My dad and mom had just died…and being the child of a mafia family brought me nothing but pain. Back then, so many people had betrayed me, and yet they still pushed their expectations onto me…”

Ricardo launched into his story with a serious expression, and the driver shot him a questioning look in the mirror.

He’d gathered, both from Ricardo’s environment and from his words and actions, that there was probably something painful in the boy’s past.

However, Ricardo’s abrupt soliloquy actually knocked Christopher for a loop.

No, wait. Wait just a minute.

This… This isn’t quite…right. Is it?

“Hold on, time out. Cease, desist, shut your mouth, three-two-one-stop.”

“…What?”

Ricardo stopped talking, although his expression didn't change, and Christopher smiled wryly and continued.

"What's this? What is it? This is strange, Ricardo. Abnormal. What on earth are you planning to do to me? Are you going to tell me a souvenir for the afterlife, pack me into an oil drum and dump me into the Chicago River? If the answer's yes, I'll put up a fight, but oh, what to do… I don't think I can kill you, Ricardo."

"Even though you killed my grandpa's men?"

Ricardo's bland reply carried a hint of sarcasm, but it was also a dangerous bombshell.

The interior of the moving car was a perfect closed room, and there was no danger of anyone overhearing them. That was probably why the conversation was able to continue.

Christopher also replied easily, without looking particularly annoyed.

"That was a job, so…hmm, no, I really can't kill a friend. When I think back and visualize that one time, I couldn't kill Chi or Leeza or Sickle or the Poet or Rail or Frank or Adele or Firo… Hmm. I wonder if that's okay."

"…Did you just name all of them? Your friends?"

"Do you think that's not many? Or is it a lot?"

"For 'good friends,' I think it's quite a lot, but… If they're just people you talk to or work with, it's not many at all," Ricardo murmured, as though making sure of the fact himself, then shook his head and went on with a sigh.

"That said, you're the only one I've got, Chris. As far as people I'm close to, I mean."

At the abrupt admission, Christopher cackled.

“Huh? What’s this? Are you after my virginity?”

“Mind if I punch you?”

Picking up on a very real intent to kill behind him, Christopher hastily retracted his words.

“Kidding, I’m kidding.” After his teasing was done, Christopher drummed lightly on the steering wheel with his fingers, looked Ricardo in the eye in the rearview mirror, and asked him a question. “I’m beginning to see where this is going… Is that why you went out shopping with me today? Because you wanted to have a secret conversation nobody could overhear in the car?”

“I guess you could say that, yeah,” Ricardo answered with a sigh, then began to explain in his detached way. “Lately, our syndicate’s been…strange.”

He looked down, and his voice began trembling ever so slightly.

“You’ve picked up on it too, right, Chris?”

“Mm-hmm, vaguely.”

It was noticeable even to a newcomer without any connections to the business, like Christopher.

If his memories were accurate, starting about two weeks ago, the Russo mansion had gotten very busy, and the mood among the syndicate men had turned tense.

A few days later, a man in strange blue coveralls had turned up. He hadn’t really interacted with Christopher or Ricardo, so Christopher hadn’t paid him much mind, but…

At about the same time, a woman named Lua had been brought to the mansion and confined there, and when he’d learned that Ricardo had been chosen to take care of her, he’d been sure something was rotten.

Come to think of it, that was right about when Placido had gotten very confident. He'd been living his life defensively, almost on the run, but suddenly, everything had changed.

"Grandpa and the others changed completely. Before, I wanted you to break the world around me…but… These days, it looks like it's breaking all on its own."

"That doesn't make you happy? If the world you hated is coming apart, isn't that cause for a couple million cheers?"

Christopher could imagine what Ricardo was feeling, but his response was mean anyway.

Ricardo sighed—"Was that payback for earlier?"—then continued to speak. Unusually, his eyes seemed sad.

"It's the world I'm seeing, after all. I'm picky about how I want it to break. That's all it is."

"Ha-ha! I've got a pretty self-centered friend, don't I?!"

Christopher bared his teeth in delight, and his appraisal put a wry smile on Ricardo's face.

"It feels as though, if this keeps up, there's going to be a real mess left over after it all goes to pieces. It's just…awfully creepy, somehow."

"Well, if you'll let me speak objectively, your grandpa's finished as a mafioso. I felt that before—more like I just knew. Granted, I'm speaking as one of the factors that cornered him. Still…they really have been strange lately. What's the best way to put it…? They've started to remind me of a dangerous religious group I saw a long time ago that believed in the imminent extinction of the human race, or a band of terrorists that seriously believes it can take over the world."

Christopher's comment was probably accurate. Ricardo looked down again, then began speaking in a gloomy voice.

“The truth is, I’d gotten my hopes up a little. I’d thought maybe my grandpa wouldn’t be able to keep up this mafia business any longer, the syndicate would be disbanded, and I’d be able to live a normal life.”

“And then you’d have no more use for me? I mean, if you’ve got normal friends…”

“If I make some normal friends, I’ll brag about you. ‘I’ve got a friend who’s a vampire.’”

“You’d put me on display?!” he protested, but Ricardo quietly shook his head.

His expression said he’d given up on making normal friends as a possibility anyway. Without letting Christopher’s ribbing distract him, Ricardo calmly went on.

“Honestly, it’s… It’s all started to go off the rails.”

As if he’d remembered something, he lightly clenched his fists.

“…After those people in lab coats came and left that liquor, everything went crazy.”

Liquor? People in lab coats?

He didn’t remember those rather important words.

Just when doubt was starting to creep up on Christopher—

Ricardo abruptly looked up, then put his face right up close to the car window.

“What is it?” Christopher asked casually, but when Ricardo responded, his voice was tense.

“Stop for a second, please.”

“? Yessir.”

Thinking this was odd, Christopher stopped the car on the side of the road, then looked outside.

However, nothing about the town seemed different, and the people on the street looked perfectly normal.

Christopher had just assumed that there was a parade or something, and as he gazed outside, he checked with Ricardo.

“What is it? Did you see something?”

In response, Ricardo strained his ears rather than his eyes to take in the situation outside. Christopher had never seen him so tense when he finally answered.

“Just now…*I heard an explosion*.”

⟺

Chicago In a certain back alley

An explosion.

If what had happened in that moment was expressed in the simplest possible terms, that word would probably cover it all.

The roar and flames of the discharge ballooned outward, and the air instantly smelled scorched.

The raging fire and wind would ordinarily have been impossible for the amount of explosives packed into the egg-sized case.

However, both forces died as quickly as they came, and then the area was filled with the screams and clamor of people running around to escape the blast.

The alley had been nearly deserted earlier, but when they heard the noise, people began to look in from the street, one after another. Rail

thought the two journalists from earlier might turn up as well, but… Even though he was the one responsible for this, his eyes were filled with a questioning light that he couldn't dispel.

"What…? Why?"

With the echoes of the explosion still in his ears, Rail murmured about what he'd just seen.

"Say, Frank? Why did my bomb explode…way over there?"

In front of them, the men who'd been sent flying by the blast's wind lay on the ground, groaning.

That said, none of them seemed to be lethally wounded. They'd been knocked into the air and come down—that was all.

Even though I'd set it to kill half of them…

There hadn't been five yards between them and the bomb. But…

"I mean, if it had exploded where I put it, the blast could have ripped off a few limbs."

As the hypothetical phrasing indicated, the bomb had actually burst more than ten yards away from them, near the opposite side of the alley.

Just before the blast, Rail had seen something closing in on the bomb.

Since he'd set it in a hurry, the watch-type timer had started with a timid one minute.

In order to cover for that, Rail hurled taunt after taunt at the men, but…

Just as the second hand had shown that it was time, he'd seen something like a silver disc bearing down on the device.

Before he could tell what it was, the disc had connected with the egg-sized bomb.

As if to drown out the sound of the activating percussion cap, a sharp metallic clang had rung out, and the bomb had been knocked more than ten yards from its original location.

As a result, the men had been left nearly unscathed.

“O-over there, Rail. There…”

Frank was pointing at the wall. When Rail glanced that way, he saw a small, silver, stick-shaped object protruding from it.

It looked as if someone had pounded a nail into the concrete wall with an enormous hammer.

Upon closer inspection, he saw that it was a wrench, about the size of a cucumber.

The moment he saw it, Rail whipped around to look at the opposite wall, in the direction the tool had come from.

And he spotted an enormous, spinning wrench.

Graham had gotten to his feet, and he was slowly advancing toward Rail and Frank, twirling the huge tool in his hands.

Certain now that this guy had thrown the smaller one to knock the bomb away, Rail narrowed his eyes slightly, applauding as if he were impressed.

“Huh…! Well done, wow, that was really something, Mr. Thug. I had no idea you’d knock it away like that.”

At the half-ironic, half-surprised compliment, Graham lowered his head and made a noise that was almost a groan.

“Kuh…”

At first, Rail thought he was moaning from the pain of Frank's kick.

However, almost immediately, he realized he was wrong.

"Kuh-keh… Keh-keh-keh-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Man, is this fun! Is life allowed to be this fun?! God must be playing favorites with me, if I'm the only one who gets such an entertaining life… Or maybe there is no God! Not if I've been given such an unequal helping of fun! In that case… What? Did I earn this thrill without relying on God, through nothing but my own luck and skill?! Daaamn… Man, oh man, do I rule or what?!"

"Th-this guy's not okay."

Graham had a lunatic's smile plastered across his face, and Frank tried to shrink down in fright before it.

Meanwhile, Graham's confidence only seemed to needle Rail…

The boy took several egg-shaped "somethings" from inside his jacket.

They appeared similar to the earlier bomb, but instead of a pocket watch, they had circular pins that resembled key rings sticking out of them.

"You look like you're enjoying yourself, mister."

His lips were smiling the way they always did, but there was no light in his eyes now as he glared at Graham.

For his part, with an expression that seemed almost rapturous, Graham kept spinning the enormous wrench in his hands with delight.

The thugs had managed to get to their feet after the shock of the blast, and when they saw Graham, they desperately put more distance between them. They probably wanted very badly not to get pulled into the fight between the three.

Once Graham was up, they understood they'd be nothing but a burden for him— And even though they were almost fleeing, Graham didn't criticize them for it.

Although it was possible that his mind simply wasn't registering them anymore.

"Aah… This is fun. Is it even possible for something to be this entertaining? Anyway, I hear you loud and clear: Negotiations have broken down. Well, that's a problem, for sure. I've got orders to bring you in alive, but as for you…Rail, wasn't it? You're real eager to kill me, aren't you?"

"Well, I guess you could say that. Ha-ha…"

Graham kept talking, as excited as he could get, and Rail narrowed his eyes even farther—then nimbly took three egg-shaped bombs between his fingers, yanking the pins out with his free hand.

"Frank… Let's go."

"O-okay."

Even before his partner responded, Rail threw the three eggs into the space between the two of them and Graham.

As the oval objects struck the ground, they instantly swelled up, turning blackish-red, and—

By the time the noise of the explosion reached the ears of the others nearby, the flames were already high, and a scorching blast wind had swept away the surrounding air.

At the same time, Frank had become a massive cannonball plunging through the flames. He didn't even feel the force of the wind or the heat that burned his skin; the giant child was like a fireman running to save a kid from a blaze.

Once he'd charged through the wall of heat, flames, and smoke, he'd launch a powerful attack on his enemy, who would be busy shielding himself from the blast.

This was the method he and Rail always used in this sort of situation.

As Frank's enormous body barreled through the flames, a hole opened for a moment.

Before it closed, Rail strained to see Graham's terror-stricken face if he could, but—

He suddenly noticed that beside the opening Frank had made in the fire, there was another, smaller hole that had nearly closed.

Huh?

A moment before he realized what that meant, a man's cheerful voice reached his eardrums.

"Hey there."

"Ah…"

When he hastily turned around, a man brimming with relaxed confidence shoved his face right in front of Rail's nose, smiling like a monster who'd found its prey.

"Why…?!"

"Did you think that big lug was the only one who could charge into a fire? The flames aren't your personal property, see? …Then whose are they? …Crap. What if they aren't mine, either? How am I going to make amends? Should I kill you, then die?"

As Graham muttered, his coveralls were smoldering here and there, and he smelled generally charred.

True, if he'd seen Frank charging through the flames, he might have been able to brace himself to do the same.

But how could they have predicted he would dive into the fire at the same time as Frank, not to mention right after he'd witnessed the inferno from that previous explosion?

On that thought, Rail smiled wryly and shook his head at the man who stood beside him.

"Mister… Is your head screwy?"

The man seemed to take this as a compliment.

"Ah, yeah, mm-hmm, that does seem to be the case. That must be why this is so much fun, right? Sure, if I'm funny in the head, I can probably enjoy completely crazy situations like normal. Depending on how I'm busted, I bet I can have fun with all the sad stuff, too. There's no limit to the ways I can enjoy this world."

Chuckling, Graham murmured to himself quietly:

"So ain't it actually a stroke of luck?"

"H-huh?"

Meanwhile, after charging into the depths of the flames, Frank had realized that Graham wasn't there.

When he hastily turned around, he saw dying flames and smoke, and beyond them, Graham's figure closing in on Rail.

"R-Rail!"

Flustered, Frank whipped around and ran toward Graham even faster than before.

Every thud of his feet against the ground echoed through the area, and small gusts from each impact created even more furious eddies in the dust hanging in the air after the explosion.

Frank charged at Graham, raising his log-like left arm and preparing to slam it into his opponent, but he stopped himself just before it happened.

“Ah…!”

Rail gave a small groan.

One side of the wrench Graham held, the adjustable end, had been opened as wide as it would go—and Rail’s neck was right in the gap.

As if he were swinging around a butterfly net, Graham hefted Rail’s body up, executed a half turn, and put the boy between Frank and himself.

“R-Raaaail…”

Frank had frozen involuntarily. He made a panicked grab for Rail, but Graham lightly drew his arm in, and Frank’s hand missed.

“Ugh…khak…ah…”

Rail moaned as if he was in pain, and Graham jumped back a step, muttering.

“I’m glad you fellas were buddies. Friendship is magnificent! Friendship is good… It’s good for the heart to have friends you can talk about anything with!”

Graham was loudly shouting something that didn’t quite seem relevant to the circumstances, but unexpectedly, he lowered his arm, set Rail on the ground, and released his throat from the wrench.

“*Koff!* …Ghk…?”



Bewildered at suddenly being freed from hostage duty, Rail looked at the man.

Despite the boy's nakedly hostile gaze, Graham ignored the atmosphere and spun the wrench he was holding.

"I figured you might yell 'Don't worry about me, just hit him,' so I shut your throat down. Let's say my gambit won— Want to say I'm the winner and end the fight here?"

"…What?"

"Well, see, they did tell me not to kill you. Call it the first step to ridding the world of conflict. We may end up making the initial strides toward world peace. If so, that step will go down in history. Or even if it doesn't! We alone will know about our great achievement. That'll be enough to let us smile at each other with pride when we meet, all by itself. Why don't we both be satisfied with that?"

"…That's BS in all sorts of ways."

There was a strained smile on Rail's lips, but his eyes blazed with anger.

Deep in his heart, the boy probably felt he was being mocked. He took several egg-shaped bombs from inside his coat.

Graham didn't stop him. His lips curved again, and he shook his head.

"I don't mind making myself plain here—"

Before he'd finished speaking, Graham's arm disappeared.

?!

Just as Rail realized he'd lost sight of it, something chilly touched his cheek.

Before he even noticed, the end of a wrench had materialized beside his face, and the metal was lightly smacking his cheek.

He's so fast—?!

The boy gulped involuntarily, and Frank, who'd been watching from a step behind him, only looked around helplessly.

Once Graham was sure of the fear in the boy's eyes, he gave a theatrical "Tsk, tsk, tsk," then finished his sentence.

"You people can't win against me."

Can't win…?

Defeat.

The moment he visualized that word, cold sweat ran down Rail's back.

Should they stop resisting and go with him to his hideout?

If they did, how would they get out of the enemy's stronghold? What if there were other people like this guy? Plus, would they even be able to escape from the inside or do any maneuvering with him there?

Was pretending to be obedient and watching for an opening the best move? …Really?

Every new idea that rose in his mind was shrouded in doubt.

That first plan should technically have worked.

However, Rail hadn't taken the most important thing into account; he had almost entirely failed to consider the possibility that this guy would be too much for them.

Grinding his teeth, Rail even began to think about making a break for it.

Just then—

"My, my… You—must feel so humiliated, Rail."

At the sound of the woman's sultry voice, Graham immediately stopped spinning his wrench, while Rail and Frank scanned the area, their eyes wide.

However, they didn't see any women nearby. The rubberneckers who'd come to check out the explosion were only watching them from a distance, back at the mouth of the alley.

That clinched it: Rail was sure who the owner of the voice was, and he shouted her name.

"Leeza!"

"You certainly talked big enough, but in the end, the two of you couldn't do a thing on your own, could you?!"

"…Shut up."

"Oh? Where has your usual banter gone? You always disguised your abnormal face with false laughter. Are you sure about this? When your lips are smiling but your eyes are glaring, it's frightfully creepy. Or are you a masochist? Do you want me to run several more tracks across your face?"

As Leeza giggled, Rail ground his teeth and stayed silent.

"I dunno who you are, but"—Graham said instead of Rail, his eyes still searching for the woman—"frankly, I don't think you should be talking about the scars on folks' faces like that. It's not great to walk on eggshells, either, but everything about that comment sounded malicious. Y-you're not going to tell me I'm insensitive for only being able to hear malice, are you? Still, since that's all I wanted to hear in what you said, is that the right answer?! Damn, I got the right answer… Where's my prize? Is the burning heart that dwells within me my prize? Well, is it? My heart is priceless! Yeah, priceless! Learn from me, wouldja?!"

Ordinarily, Shaft would have offered a comeback right about then, but he was watching the situation from a distance and couldn't even hear Leeza's voice, so instead he lamented to the friend next to him: "He's finally started talking to invisible people…"

In the midst of a situation that seemed to be developing at random, Leeza spoke to him, sounding mildly disgusted.

"My, my. I don't really understand, but… Are you taking that boy's side? If I translated that simian screeching of yours into human speech, would it say you're playing at virtue out of a misguided sense of justice?"

There was clear condescension in her voice, and Graham tapped the wrench against his own shoulder, giving vent to a long speech in time with the rhythm.

"Nah, I'm not pretending I'm good. I'm a full-on bad guy. Back when I was at the auto factory, they split us into teams of white fellas and black fellas. The boss told us there was plenty of black fellas to take our place. Later on, I happened to get friendly with one of the black fellas, and he said the bosses had told his team the same thing about us to stir 'em up. Well, I'm bad enough to think that kinda move is *a fair one*. But ya see… Didn't you notice? Just now, in a roundabout way, you called yourself a loser."

"…?"

"You told me, 'The only way I can win against Rail is by bringing up the scars on his face and running him down. And so aaaaall I can do is mention those and bask in my teeny-weeny sense of superiority. That's the only victory open to this here loser-underdog, so please pity me and don't say anything, my owner and master.' Brazen! Shameless! What is this? Masochism? Are you a masochist?"

"Wha…?!"

Unusually for her, Leeza's voice trembled in response to Graham's arbitrary remarks.

"Did I nail it, Doll-who's-just-a-voice? The thing is, though, I hate dogs. I think they should die in a ditch. Death or die. Death and peace, if you wanna sound a little nicer about it… Yeah, death and peace!"

"…You're quite the joker, aren't you? Girls will hate you, you know."

The pitch of the voice dropped slightly. At the same time, Frank was looking up, and he spotted a silver ring flying toward Graham's back.

"Aaaaah…"

Registering Frank's gaze and the change in his expression, Graham spun around.

The spinning silver ring closed in on him, and—

With a pleasant, metallic *clang*, the enormous disc formed by Graham's spinning wrench knocked the incoming ring away effortlessly.

"Fun… Man, this is fun! What a fun chick! To think you'd go out of your way to add another reason to call yourself a loser! 'Unless I use surprise attacks, I can't beat youuuu'! And then your surprise attack failed?! What's up with that?! Damn, this is—this is in the top seven hundred and ninety-eight in my 'fun' ranking for the year… Hmm? Which means it's not all that fun, I guess. Okay, well, you're boring, so get outta here."

The silver ring had been knocked straight up into the air, and Graham caught it on the end of his wrench as it fell.

The ring looked like an angel halo, and its outer edge was a sharp blade. If the attack had landed a moment ago, there was a good possibility that he would have been fatally wounded.

Even so, Graham's long-winded speech wasn't knocked off course at all, and as Leeza quietly asked him a question, her voice turned serious.

"…How did you notice that?"

"There's nothing I can't see. I've got a bit of a special ability."

This was a lie, of course.

The change in Frank's expression had clued him in to the surprise attack. Since he had succeeded, though, Graham had come up with an impromptu bluff, and in the space of a few seconds, he'd managed to convince himself it was true.

Still keeping tabs on Rail and Frank behind him, he turned his attention to the blind spots nearby. The next time a silver ring came flying his way, he'd use its direction to locate the enemy.

Despite his building focus, Graham kept nettling her.

"So, what are you gonna do? Are you going to come along quietly, too? Or are you gonna abandon these guys and lam off by yourself?"

"…"

Leeza thought hard for a little while, then promptly spit her answer back at him.

"That's my line, you foolish boy."

"…?"

Leeza had abruptly regained her composure, and in spite of himself, Graham frowned.

Did something change?

Though he was broadcasting high energy to the others, on the inside, Graham was extremely calm. Quietly, he turned his eyes to his surroundings…

…and spotted two newcomers.

A plainly suspicious-looking Asian and a woman in a classy dress had pushed their way through the crowd.

At the sight of these people, who obviously didn't look like they belonged here, a few of the rubberneckers began to think this ruckus might be an advertisement for a circus or something.

As they watched the pair in the incongruous outfits approach, Graham—who looked out of place himself—gave an entertained whistle, while Rail and Frank's faces shone at the sight of the interlopers.

"Chi! Sickle!" Rail shouted.

Graham gave a brief laugh, then took the wanted poster out of his jacket and checked the names he'd just heard.

"Chi… Hong Chi-Mei and Sickle… The sister who uses capoeira? Huh. So those journalists really were something else. Well, I'm glad I got that cleared up. That's good."

While he was muttering, the pair passed through Graham's group of underlings and came to stand beside Rail and Frank. At this point, Graham's hoodlums weren't even attempting to interfere; they just watched their boss from a distance.

Ignoring Graham and his mumbling, Rail spoke. His color had improved a little.

"How did you know where we…?"

“When you set off a string of tacky explosions, anybody could figure it out. The police will be here soon, too, so we’ll finish this up before then,” Sickle responded gruffly.

Then her eyes went to Graham.

“So you’re the enemy, huh?”

Her extremely surly words were in stark contrast to her outfit.

However, one look at the dark edge in her eyes, as though shadows had been honed into blades, and you’d think her manner of speech might have created the most beautiful combination of all.

As trivial thoughts crossed Graham’s mind thanks to his extremely manic mood, he said something that didn’t betray the slightest hint of intelligence.

“Hey… And you’re the young lady who uses capoeira? I know about you; I sure do, and it only goes one way, me to you. Why do you talk like a guy when you dress like a doll? Damn, I’m getting really psyched for some reason; is this love? If it’s love, what do I do? Should I accept it or not? Is the true form of love the exhilaration I feel because I’m not sure?”

Instead of answering the other party’s question, Graham blabbed away unhindered.

“…In a different way from the Poet, the way you talk is irritating.”

Sickle spoke dispassionately, pulling her already cross-looking eyebrows into an even deeper scowl.

“Let me say this now, just so there are no misunderstandings.”

“What? You’re planning to invite a misunderstanding? Between the two of us? Oh boy. What if it’s a kiss? What should I do? And if it’s just a misunderstanding, that would mean you don’t care about me at

all. You're gonna break my heart. Damn, I think that's a first for me. I'm getting dumped before I even get the chance to tell her I'm in love… Before I fall in love at all, really, and that doesn't happen every day. Anyway, what about it?"

"Go to hell… What I meant about 'no misunderstandings' is this: You called me a capoeira user. Capoeira is technically a martial art, a dance, and a game that brings a smile to peoples' faces."

As she spoke, Sickle took a step forward and put her face right up close to Graham's.

At that distance, he could feel her breath. The position could easily have been taken as the prelude to a kiss, but Sickle went on, with an irritated expression that made it clear she had no intention of kissing him.

"However, the only purpose behind my capoeira is breaking the other guy."

Even as she finished speaking, she soundlessly launched an attack on the enemy in front of her.

"In other words, it's fairly *heretical*."

"Uh…?"

Graham mistakenly thought she'd just toppled over.

The beautifully dull eyes right in front of him had suddenly disappeared.

Instead, he sensed wind and a shadow bearing down on the left side of his face.

Uh-oh.

Before his brain could think, his body moved, and he leaned back nearly as far as he could.

The next instant, Sickle's heel passed right through the spot where his head had just been.

A strong wind blasted Graham's face, and at the same time, the woman's voice echoed in his ears from below.

"So don't look at my moves and assume they're capoeira."

Graham had almost closed his eyes in spite of himself, but he had registered that what little he could see of the woman's body below him was still spinning, and he backed up even farther.

"That would be an insult to capoeira."

I don't really get it, but if you're doing something heretical, aren't you the one who's insulting it?

Graham was going to yell the thought aloud, but the edge of a foot passed right in front of his eyes. It really wasn't the time.

On top of that, there was more than one enemy.

Graham had tried to get a wide distance in order to acquaint himself with the woman's unfamiliar movements, but in a terribly efficient motion, Chi crept up soundlessly and grabbed his arm.

Chi's hands were wrapped in thick layers of cloth, like a mummy's, but he'd deftly trapped Graham's arm, and it didn't feel like he'd be able to shake him off just by struggling a bit.

"Whoa…?"

"End of the line."

Flipping his own body, Chi twisted Graham's arm up with no mercy whatsoever.

Before he could even think of resisting—a *krikk* echoed in the alley, and pain washed over Graham. It felt as if his arm had been torn off.

“Ghk…aah…?”

Brandishing the wrench in his right hand, Graham ripped himself away from Chi, then leaped back even farther.

Sickle turned a midair somersault, returning to her original stance, and Chi spoke to Graham, rubbing his cloth-wrapped arms.

“Ordinarily, I would just cut you, but we have some questions to ask you. If you refuse, I’ll dislocate the joints on your remaining limbs.”

It wasn’t clear whether Graham was listening to Chi or not. He was holding his arm and groaning quietly.

Sickle spoke to him, sounding a bit disappointed.

“Is that it? The way he talked was crazy enough to give the Poet a good run for his money, but…”

“Ghk…aah…”

While he listened to the pair murmur self-centered things as they closed in on him—

—Graham was remembering something from a long time ago.

As a kid, he’d loved taking anything and everything to pieces.

His parents had lectured him harshly for it.

“You don’t know what it feels like for the things you break!” they’d said. The idea that everything had a soul had sounded a bit Asian or Native American.

They’re right. It’s just like Mom and Dad say.

I wonder what it feels like to get broken.

I’ll have to find out.

There was no telling how a boy who wasn't yet ten years old had managed it.

Graham himself didn't remember what he'd done to make it happen.

What he did remember was pain, despair, and a terrible loneliness.

His mother had heard groaning from her son's room and come running—and found that most of the joints in the boy's body had been twisted the wrong way. On his left hand, every joint in each finger had been dislocated, and the muscles had swelled up like a baseball glove.

As he remembered the incident, Graham's right hand tightened around the wrench.

Back then…I was relieved, wasn't I?

When I found out I was something that would come apart properly, didn't I feel a little safer for some reason?

Once I knew how much it hurt to get broken, I thought, "Now it's fine if I break stuff."

Why had he thought something like that as a kid, and why had he wanted to break things so badly? For a while, he hadn't understood. Now, though, he could vaguely understand what had gone through his young mind.

He'd realized that, sooner or later, all things inevitably decayed. As a child, he probably hadn't been able to handle that fact.

Maybe it was in order to deny it, or possibly because he wanted to at least do the deed personally once he knew the despair of realizing new things would break someday—

There had probably been all sorts of reasons, and they had built up to create his current tendencies.

“I’m an idiot, huh?”

Sensing a certain nostalgia in the pain in his arm, Graham slowly raised his wrench.

He hadn’t been able to sort through his feelings in his adolescence, and at the end of that phase, Graham had met a guy named Ladd. Picking up on something similar in him, he’d followed him as his underling.

Recalling the face of his sworn brother, who was currently in jail, Graham murmured to himself.

“Well, now… That’s a problem.”

“Hmm?”

Graham had abruptly stopped groaning, and Chi eyed him closely with a dubious noise.

“I got a little full of myself. Maybe I thought there was no way I’d ever get rolled. That’s no good, seriously no good. My man Ladd will give me priority on his kill list.”

“What does that mean? Are you begging for your life?”

Without answering Chi, Graham gave his wrench a light twist, nimbly caught his dangling left arm in its tip, and—

“There we…go.”

Krekk.

The sound was slightly lower than when it had been dislocated, and the strength rapidly returned to Graham’s arm.

“Wha—?!”

Occasionally, skilled martial artists are able to pop their own dislocated joints back into place— But the move Graham had just made was completely different from anything they did.

Using his industrial wrench and treating his own bones as metal components, he'd repaired the dislocated joint with a single, economical twist.

Naturally, the pain from the torn nerves and blood vessels and the overextended tendons probably hadn't subsided.

However, no such discomfort was visible in his expression.

On the contrary, Graham set his wrench against his shoulder with a rapturous smile, and the light that filled his eyes was even madder than before.

"My head's clear now. Anyway… The guys who choose not to kill and take 'em alive are the ones who are positive they won't get offed, right? Right."

Smack. Smack.

Graham passed the spinning wrench from his left hand to his right hand and back, gradually speeding up.

"But listen: If I'm like that, my brother Ladd will kill me."

Smack! Smack! Smack! Smack!

"So, see… For now, I've decided the two kids, Rail and Frank, are the ones I'll take in alive, and I won't give a damn about the rest of you."

Smack, smack, smack, smack, smack-smack-smack-smack.

"I learned how to fight from my man Ladd. I ain't got the brains to retreat."

Smacksmacksmacksmacksmacksmacksmacksmackspakspakspakspak…

“You people… You’re sure you won’t break, yeah?”

“What…are you saying?”

Whf, whf, whf, whf, whf, whf, whf, whf, whf, whf, whf, whf, whf, whf.

Seeing the spin on that wrench, which was gradually working its way up to an incredible speed, Chi and Sickle gulped quietly. Frank and Rail weren’t even trying to participate in the fight anymore; they were watching the situation develop from a distance.

“Your teamwork, your pride, the bones in your necks. It’s all the same to me.”

Wfwfwfwfwfwfwfwfwfwfwfwfwfwfwfwfwfwfwfwfwfwfwfwfwfwfwfwfwf—

Graham’s excitement had hit its peak, and the emotion swirling inside him wasn’t sadness or pleasure anymore. The only thing there was a hopelessly crazed exhilaration.

The expression he wore couldn’t be interpreted as either sorrow or a smile. Graham shook his head, then muttered one brief phrase to Chi and the others.

“I’ll break ’em all.”

It was an extremely simple phrase, and thus, one with power.

⟺

A few minutes later

In terms of time, it was a little later than the audience had expected. In terms of how the situation had developed, it was even later than that.

That was when the cops rushed to the scene en masse after receiving a report.

The only people in the alley were the excited spectators, and not a single participant of the actual incident was still there.

There was damage from multiple explosions, apparently, and gray smoke was still rising from smoldering black pits in the pavement.

When they'd heard this was both a bombing and a fight, the first thing the police had thought of was a murder case from three years ago.

Someone had discovered the charred corpses of a man named Sidaris, believed to have been a Russo Family executive, and his subordinates. A bomb seemed to be the culprit.

The Russos themselves had feigned innocence—*A dispute? What dispute would that be? And the mafia is a fictional organization; we ain't involved in that.*—and so, as far as the police were concerned, the incident had led to a disappointing conclusion. They didn't know who the other party in the conflict had been, and the case had gone cold.

However, now there were plenty of witnesses.

Thinking they might be able to get some solid information this time, they immediately took statements from the people in the area, but…

Strangely, the eyewitness testimonies didn't mesh at all.

"A huge kid and this other scarred-up kid tore the place apart."

"It was Martians. Martians attacked."

"This pink elephant just blew up."

“A guy in blue coveralls…mowed down this group of weirdos.”

“Let me just say this. It was a rather intriguing spectacle.”

“This giant dame, ’bout ten foot tall, she stripped down to a swimsuit and went nuts.”

“Someone rode in on a weird little mammoth and then ran off somewhere.”

“The eggs exploded! I kid you not! It was freaky! I’ll never eat eggs again!”

“The end of this fork got bigger and bigger the closer it got to the tip. Stabbed me right in eye.”

“After he popped his arm back into place with a wrench, the guy in the coveralls… Man, he was a wonder. Actually, do you know Ladd? He was a famous fighter around here. This guy could give him a run for his money.”

“Ten or so guys in black took out pistols and fired a few shots into the air. They said, ‘We’re going to conduct a test of a new explosive here, starting now!’ and then there was that explosion, y’know? Shook me up.”

“Mr. Policeman, the criminal had white hair, and his ears were half torn off. Hurry and catch him, won’t you?”

“Yellow clothes, yellow clooOOOoothes!”

“It was right before you fellas got here, I think. They all split up and booked every which way.”

The testimonies were completely inconsistent.

Several of them mentioned certain people—“a man in blue coveralls,” “a giant kid over six feet tall,” “an Asian with mummy hands”—but none of the statements were credible.

The police took down all the testimonies, submitted a report, and inspected the scene, but…

…in the end, the event was filed away as an accident involving an industrial fuel transport.

Naturally, several newspapers had their doubts about that announcement. However…

…due to *a certain major incident* that occurred immediately afterward, in the end, the matter never enlivened the papers.

That was the future that lay in store.

In the alley where the unsuccessful on-site inspection was taking place…

A man who had been watching the policemen from a distance settled his hat down lower over his eyes and looked up at the sky.

“O God, O mankind, tragedy, tragedy falls. We are merely beings who live deep in the midst of our human karma, and erelong, karma will surely settle inside men and devour everything. It is terror for me. The moment the karma ordained for me settles within my being and sets its teeth against me from the inside— What will I see? By then, the world that enfolded me will already be within me, as will human karma. When the membrane around me has been removed, what will I see there? Upon what will I gaze while my heart is devoured…?”

The man leaned against the wall of a building, shouting dramatically—and the man and woman standing just beside him tersely turned around and sighed.

“Would you give it a rest, Poet? You’re the only one who wasn’t spotted, so what are you trying to pull by drawing attention for no reason?”

“I couldn’t agree more. I know you’re no earthly good in a fight, but where were you during that uproar?”

In response to the sudden comments, the Poet shook his head—again in an exaggerated manner—and began to speak calmly, dwelling nostalgically on the distant past.

“…The most noble yet fragile things in the world, and simultaneously the most steadfast, are the bonds between people. Namely, love. Those imbued with the desire to gaze with fascination on the world’s conflict sympathized with their transitory neighbors who harbored the same emotions. Love, it is love. Love is a rein of chartreuse, a formless chain, where each man holds the other bound. A stunted being such as myself lacks the power to sever such bonds. Indeed, I must. After all, I too am one who travels in search of love…”

As the Poet related his flowery nonsense, an exasperated voice replied, “In other words, you couldn’t even push your way through the looky-loos.”

However, the man who made the remark wasn’t the one who’d spoken earlier.

He was a fellow in a suit, ambling down the street like anyone else. The couple from a moment before had casually disappeared onto the broad Chicago avenue.

A small girl who had been walking behind the Poet murmured with a bewitching smile not at all childlike.

“I’m impressed you can interpret the Poet’s drivel, Sham.”

“You should get used to him already, Hilton.”

That response came from a police officer who was there to investigate the scene. After him, an old woman who’d been giving him her statement spoke up.

“Is it even *possible* to get used to the defective rambling of a deviant like him?”

As soon as they’d finished speaking, every one of the people who’d spoken resumed whatever they’d been doing, as if nothing had happened.

It was as if everyone had been temporarily possessed by ghosts, and in the midst of the peculiar situation…

…the Poet sighed deeply. Then, without a word, he put the alley with the herd of rubberneckers behind him.

Silently—which was unusual for him—he entered a different, deserted alley.

Then, after making sure no one else was around, he adopted a slightly lonely expression and murmured, with no theatrics this time, “Still… To think, he has that many ‘twins’ lurking in Chicago alone. Apparently, Master Huey intends to turn this city and New York into full experiment sites…”

By putting his thoughts into words, he made himself recognize that he was indeed standing in reality.

Reviewing the position in which they had been placed, the Poet spoke ironically.

“The Alice who wandered into a prison may, in fact, be us.”

⇔

Chicago In a certain back alley

I miscalculated. I totally miscalculated.

Rail was wearing a hat and muffler he'd taken out of his backpack, walking quickly through the gaps of the city of Chicago.

Although, well, it's not like I ran proper calculations to begin with.

He was still wearing the silver coat, and he knew he'd probably stick out if he walked down the major streets like that, so he'd elected to stick to the alleys as he quietly hurried along.

It's impossible… I never dreamed even Sickle and Chi wouldn't be able to do it!

As the boy shouted internally, he recalled the scene he'd witnessed a moment ago.

The man in the coveralls had shouted something strange and *popped in* his own arm, and the moment after he'd said "I'll break 'em," his movements had clearly changed.

He was faster than Chi. His moves were trickier than Sickle's. He had raw power on par with Frank's.

When Sickle unleashed a kick right in front of him again—the guy in the coveralls literally dismantled it.

He ran to get inside the kick's attack range, and then, as the two passed each other, his spinning wrench connected with Sickle's leg. Like two swords clashing, he'd stopped Sickle's attack with an attack of his own.

There was a disturbing noise, and Sickle immediately jumped back. Then, limping on one leg, she swiftly put some distance between herself and her opponent.

Rail didn't understand what had happened. When he took a closer look at Sickle from a distance, he saw it…

The joints in the foot she was favoring were dislocated and misshapen, and the flesh didn't look the way it should.

Then Chi and Sickle attacked simultaneously.

The man stopped every one of their serial attacks with his wrench—and at the same time, he destroyed an arm for each of them.

Rail wasn't even able to see what was going on.

He couldn't follow the speedy wrench the man in the coveralls wielded. From where he stood on the sidelines, all he could see was that whenever that silver disc touched the other two, they were repulsed with a force that broke bones.

Clicking his tongue, Chi gave his arm a good swing to force his dislocated shoulder joint back into place. It wasn't the same as using a wrench to fix it, and to Rail, this method seemed more sensible.

Rail had considered using bombs to provide support, but he decided that this wasn't territory he could risk meddling with…

And at that point, it finally hit him.

This guy… When he fought me, he was going easy.

Now that he thought about it, it wasn't surprising, but it was incredibly mortifying. He ground his teeth, and the sutures on his face creaked and warped.

Just then, as the feeling of utter uselessness struck— Behind the crowd that had gathered at the mouth of the alley, Rail saw several police cars approaching.

"…! Frank! Carry Sickle and run for it!"

"Huh? Ah, waaaaaah…"

Frank had followed the other boy's gaze and noticed the cops were coming, too.

Rail took several blue eggs out of his coat and yanked all the pins from their sides at once.

"It'll be better if we split up to make our getaway. We'll head for the place where we all met up to begin with!"

"Huh? Oh, uh-huh, okay."

Before Frank was finished answering, Rail threw the blue eggs.

The next moment, they burst with a light popping sound—

—and a cloud of smoke instantly enveloped one of the great city's back alleys.

Dammit… What the hell was that guy?

Rail had ended up running away, and he felt a certain sort of fear to accompany his frustration.

Nothing like this had ever happened on the jobs Lamia had done before, not even once.

What on earth should they do now?

The idea of asking Huey for instructions surfaced in his mind, but Rail hastily struck that from the list.

Like I'd seriously be that guy's puppet! I'm… We're just taking his jobs because we've got no choice! We're doing the things he can't do, because he begs us to!

Rail shook his head, rousing his young pride.

Once he met up with the rest, they'd need to decide what to do about that guy in blue.

It was likely that the Poet, Sickle, Chi, and that rotten Leeza would act as the main members and come up with some sort of plan. However, he couldn't bring himself to be satisfied with simply following it.

He'd come up with the idea of acting as decoys on his own, and he was the one who'd put it into action with Frank.

This humiliating rout had been the result.

Rail's young heart understood this, and mortification coursed through him.

At the same time, he felt guilt over the fact that Sickle and Chi had gotten hurt because of him.

For now, I've got to run…

I'll give Sickle and Chi a proper apology later. Although I'll blow that witch Leeza away someday.

As he thought, Rail looked around the alley, searching for a place to change out of his coat, but—

Something suddenly struck him as odd, and his gaze stopped.

There hadn't been much traffic in the alley to begin with, but it seemed far quieter than it should be.

Then he realized that, at some point, he'd become the only one walking through this area, and there were several figures blocking his path. In spite of himself, he tensed up.

Enemies?!

Were they friends of that Graham guy?

As he reached into his jacket, Rail strained his eyes, examining the shapes that stood in his way.

Researchers?!

The next moment, the boy imagined the ones he'd been personally involved with, and he shuddered.

In front of him was an odd group in white lab coats.

Huey's underlings?! Don't tell me— Did they decide I was useless and come to get rid of me?!

A large cargo vehicle was parked behind the figures. It seemed to be hiding the group in white from the street at the other end of the alley.

When he whirled around, there was no truck in that direction— But a group of big men in lab coats was facing him and blocking the way out.

I'm surrounded?!

Cold sweat broke out on Rail's back as he calculated whether he could break through the situation with the explosives he had on him.

Maybe… I can… I can!

Ordinarily, he would have already yanked the pins out with a cheeky grin, but Graham had planted fear in the boy just a moment ago, and he was on edge.

However, as if to shatter that tension, a woman in a lab coat at the center of the group addressed him in an extremely easygoing voice.

"Um, ummm… Are you Rail?"

"…?"

The carefree comment felt out of place, and for a moment, Rail's thoughts shut down.

However, if she knew his name, the scars would give him away even if he denied it, and that would be that.

Having reached that conclusion, he nodded truthfully, hoping to figure out who these people were.

“Yes…?”

At that, the woman clasped her hands happily, and her delighted cry echoed in the alley.

“Oh, goody, we finally found you! You’re almost never alone, so this seemed like our chance; we scrambled to get out here, but the lookouts said they’d lost sight of you somewhere around here. Whew, that gave us a bit of a scare. Still, it’s all right now, isn’t it?! Um, so, we’d love it if you’d come with us.”

“…Why? Who are you, miss?”

The bespectacled woman seemed kind, but Rail’s brain—or rather, everything in him—was sounding a warning.

It was subtle, but he sensed something familiar and loathsome about the individual in front of him.

Then, in the next moment…

“Oh, yes, of course. My name is Renee. I’m the director of Nebula’s sixth pharmaceutical development department.”

When he heard that, Rail realized the source of that feeling.

“We have several things on the agenda, but… Let’s see. Um, first, I’d really like it if you showed us those strange bombs you have. According to the reports, they don’t seem to be ordinary explosives. Is that correct?”

The alarm blared.

“After that, we thought we might be able to use you to lure the others to us…”

And blared.

“Um… Oh, yes! This was the most important thing.”

The alarm was screaming through the boy's body and memories even louder than when he'd witnessed Graham's strength a few moments ago.

Oh, oh, this lady…

She's just like…Huey.

Rail was getting nausea and chills at the same time, but the woman who'd introduced herself as Renee sounded tickled as she explained.

Her voice was innocent, and there was no hint of malice in it.

The cruelty was only in her words.

"We were hoping to dissect your body a little so we could see what bits Huey tinkered with! And so, *we'd like you to let us dismember you, just a tad*."

I knew it… She's just like him, just like Huey…!

She only sees me…as a thing*!*

⟺

"Another one… I heard another explosion."

"Huh? Really?"

Ricardo had abruptly frozen, and Christopher glanced around.

They'd opened all the windows as wide as they could and driven slowly, but Christopher hadn't been able to hear any explosions over the noise of the city crowds.

A short while ago, while they were in the car following Ricardo's ears toward the explosion, they'd come across a cluster of police cars around an alley. They could tell something had happened, but under the circumstances, they couldn't get close.

They could have gotten out of the car and gone closer to the site, but…

“If they ask you for a statement, Chris, we may have a problem.”

Respecting Ricardo’s words, Christopher had obediently left the scene.

Even so, he was concerned when Ricardo said he’d heard further explosions, so he’d opened the windows and let the ambient noise go right through the car.

As Ricardo’s bodyguard, he probably should have gotten him away from such a dangerous place as quickly as possible. However, the explosions shaking the town had thrilled Christopher, and he’d decided to let himself get caught up in the moment and let Ricardo’s ears guide them.

Not long after that, Ricardo had said he’d heard another explosion.

“I didn’t hear anything… Is this one of those things? Since a bomb killed your folks, are you more sensitive to that now?”

Christopher’s remark couldn’t have been more tactless.

However, Ricardo not only didn’t seem to care, he actually agreed with Christopher.

“That could be. When the bomb blew Mom and Dad away, I heard the roar from inside the house, so…for a while, I heard the sound in my dreams, over and over. Even when I was awake, sometimes I thought I could hear it still.”

“Is it possible that what you heard just now was a hallucination?”

“I think that would be ideal. I get the feeling I heard it from that direction, though…”

Shaking his head and examining their surroundings, Ricardo had him drive in the direction from which he said he'd heard the noise.

"Anyway, if we go to the site of an explosion, what are we going to do? It might just be a car accident. We might get caught up in it and die, you know?"

Christopher's words were half-teasing, but Ricardo was still looking out the window, and he made no attempt to answer.

Christopher sighed with a weak smile, and secretly hoped something interesting would happen.

"If it's a mad bomber, it might be fun to catch him ourselves. He might break up that daily routine that's worrying you, break it up so thoroughly it'll be gone without a trace. Ha-ha! Want to sing a song to call him to us? It's called 'Bombville Bridge is Falling Down.' I guess I should base the first few lines on the Mother Goose tune…"

Christopher seemed serious about his song, and he began muttering lyrics.

Ricardo had been ignoring him completely, but he suddenly leaned toward the driver's seat and pointed up ahead, in the direction they were traveling.

"There…!"

Beyond his finger, they saw a column of furious smoke rising from the alley.

"Wow."

Christopher whistled lightly, then stomped on the accelerator.

Little by little, an audience was starting to form on the street. Considering the amount of smoke, some people had probably reported it to the police and the fire department already.

Deciding that they wouldn't be able to stick around for long, Christopher brought the car up next to the site, then braked to a crawl.

Wondering what had happened, he shot a sidelong glance at the scene from the driver's seat. However, the smoke was worse than he'd thought, and he couldn't see through it.

Just then, another explosion roared, and this time, Christopher's ears picked it up all too well. At the sound of the blast from the alley's depths, the crowd at the entrance scattered in all directions.

As the onlookers disbanded, it got easier to see into the alley, but the smoke still hid whatever was happening inside.

"What do you want to do? If you tell me to go look, I will."

"You say that, but…"

Excited, Christopher was rhythmically drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. Ricardo hesitated, scanning the scene outside the window, and then—

"…?! Chris!"

"? What?"

"Over there! There's a kid…!"

Ricardo pointed out the window. Near the mouth of the alley, a small figure was crawling as if the smoke was holding them down.

The figure still seemed to be conscious. Little by little, they were attempting to drag themselves out of the alley, but soon they stopped doing even that, and only their silver coat sparkled and shone.

"We've got to help…"

No sooner had he muttered the words than Ricardo was out of the car, running toward the boy who'd collapsed in the alley.

“Good gracious. When trauma’s the motivator, people sure do act fast,” Christopher murmured sardonically as he also got out of the car and started toward the fallen child in the alley.

“Hmm?”

Partway there, he noticed the long silver coat the kid was wearing, and his heart jumped.

“Bombs…”

In his head, the word clicked together with everything else, and when he spotted the black suture scars that ran down the fallen child’s neck, Christopher arrived at a single answer.

Involuntarily breaking into a run, he locked all his questions away in the depths of his heart, just for that moment.

Then, scooping up the child’s motionless body, he called the boy’s name with a look of disbelief.

“…Rail?”



CHAPTER 4

MISFITS OUTSIDE THE CITY

CHAPTER 4: MISFITS OUTSIDE THE CITY

The Russo mansion Evening

“And…? How does the vice president of a New York newspaper and his apprentice journalist know those brats?” Placido Russo asked solemnly.

The room’s walls were lined with old-fashioned antiques. They weren’t chintzy trinkets or ostentatiously luxurious; they simply displayed their owner’s power by being there.

The atmosphere of money and desire coiling in here might have made even someone with a clear conscience shrink down involuntarily.

However, the man currently facing the owner of this room responded to his questions calmly, with no sign of nerves.

“Hmm… The fact of the matter is that we merely met in passing today. From the look of the situation, though, I doubt that answer will satisfy you.”

The vice president’s monocle gleamed as he spoke, and he glanced at Carol beside him.

The girl’s camera had been confiscated, and she was shivering hard and holding back tears. Although no one had asked her any questions, she seemed ready to tell them anything, right down to the embarrassing things her parents had said in their sleep.

When he looked farther back, he saw Carol’s camera sitting on a table. The man with the scarred cheek who’d brought them here stood beside it.

Once the vice president had pieced together the situation in his mind, he spoke without letting himself be cowed.

“If you contact our company in New York, I believe you will be able to confirm our identities. If you are searching for the pair who joined us for lunch, and you initiate an official transaction with us in our secondary capacity as an information brokerage, we can supply you with information.”

“Information brokerage? Did you say ‘information brokerage’?”

The term sounded like it belonged in a stage play, and in spite of himself, Placido chuckled at its sudden appearance here.

“Ha! Did you hear that, Krieck? He says he’s an information broker, in this day and age! That’s a new one on me!”

“His little predicament must have spooked him. Made his head go funny.”

When the conversation turned to him, Krieck—the man with the scarred cheek—walked over to the vice president, smiling in mild disgust.

“Hey, newshound. Don’t joke around too much, all right? If you’re in the newspaper business, I bet you do know a thing or two, and you’re probably real proud of your book learning compared to us thugs, but… Do you actually think the info from some no-name newspaper like yours is enough to deal with us?”

He sounded casual enough, but the force his voice exuded was extraordinarily heavy.

If the vice president cracked an ill-considered joke at this point, he shouldn’t be surprised to find a fist, a knife, or even a bullet coming his way.

The atmosphere was almost palpable, but the vice president bore it and gazed back at Krieck coldly. He showed no sign of distress, either in his expression or his posture.

“…”

Maybe the sharp light in those eyes intimidated him, because Krieck clammed up for a bit.

When he was sure the other man had fallen silent, the vice president continued speaking, calmly and at his own speed, this time with the intent of shutting up Placido, the most powerful person in the room.

“True, what we know may be limited. For example, the fact that the white suit worn by your nephew, Mr. Ladd Russo, during his arrest for his involvement in the Flying Pussyfoot incident on the final day of 1931, originally belonged to you.”

“…!”

Placido caught his breath involuntarily at the abrupt revelation.

Even when he saw this, the vice president didn’t ease up. He continued with a merciless torrent of information about his buried past.

“It appears that, since the name embroidered on the lining of that suit differed from Ladd’s, it nearly became the subject of a police investigation. If you had given it to him, it would imply you were possibly aware of his plans to rob that train.”

“Why, you… What are you?”

Placido was no longer smiling.

He’d thought he was doing the threatening, but now he was the one covered in sweat.

When he realized that fact, he glared at the vice president with eyes that were clearly wary.

For his part, the vice president gave a deferential bow, responding courteously to the question.

“As I mentioned earlier, my name is Gustav St. Germain. I serve as the vice president of the DD newspaper, and I am a humble information broker. I have just been intolerably rude to you. However, I determined that, had I not been so, I would have been unable to impart an accurate understanding of my identity to you.”

“…I see. So what, you play Peeping Tom, blackmail the other guy for cash?”

“Perish the thought. We provide our customers with the information they desire in exchange for either new information or currency equivalent to its value. That is all. Naturally, the information I have just related to you is too trivial to charge for.”

Carol looked at the vice president, who was gradually growing more polite, and even as her shoulders quivered, she thought:

Oh. The vice president is planning to turn this gangster man into a customer.

When the vice president dealt with customers, his speech grew more courteous than was strictly necessary. Carol had seen far too much of that aspect of his personality before now, and she was familiar with another of his characteristics as well.

The vice president…is never picky about who he takes on as a customer.

Carol’s mouth was working uselessly in panic. As usual, she couldn’t tell what was going on behind the vice president’s keen eyes. She’d had no idea what he’d been thinking when he’d introduced her to the Nebula chairman, either.

He probably just dealt in information like a machine, with no regard for justice or evil.

Carol idolized that aspect of him and simultaneously feared it— But none of that would improve her plight now, so all she could do was watch it unfold.

She gritted her teeth, frustrated at her powerlessness, but when she glanced at Placido's face, she immediately began to tremble in fear again.

Meanwhile, Placido glowered for a while, but then…

As if he'd hit on an idea, he narrowed his eyes and made a business proposition to the information broker.

"Hypothetically. You mentioned Ladd getting his elbows checked by the cops. The day before that…somebody robbed our outfit, and some little shits killed a few of my valued employees."

"B-boss."

"Shut up."

Krieck spoke up, but Placido checked him, mentally organizing what he needed to ask the information broker.

"The punk who killed my men is Jacuzzi Splot. I know his name and his face, and that's it. The pair of robbers who lifted our cash, though… I don't know a damn thing about them, names included."

As he took a risk and revealed his organization's disgrace, his voice grew even heavier as he slowly spoke to the vice president.

"I ain't got a lotta details, but if you check into it, can you get me the perps, fast?"

The mood seemed to imply that if he said it couldn't be done, under the circumstances, they were liable to be silenced forever, but…

The vice president bowed politely, lips curving, and switched over completely from his journalist face to his information broker one so he could talk business.

“In that case, let us negotiate the rate—most valued customer.”

“…When you get handed info that easily, it actually makes you nervous, doesn’t it?”

As he gazed at the memo he’d scribbled down, Placido hemmed quietly.

“Isaac Dian and Miria Harvent… So you’re saying these robber clowns are pals with Jacuzzi Splot?”

“That information is from approximately one month ago. Naturally, they may have fallen out in the meantime; I request that you keep that in mind as well.”

The vice president answered with the meticulous phrasing of an information broker.

Although Placido had accepted the deal, he was watching him skeptically.

“…Frankly, this doesn’t mean I trust you. I’ve never met an information broker I could trust. You might’ve just come up with a bunch of baloney to give me. At the very least, until we catch that scarred-up kid and the big one, I think I’ll have you spend a few days here as my guests.”

“Hmm. Very well,” the vice president responded briefly. He’d already gone back to his journalist persona, and the air of courtesy had faded away.

Picking up on this, Carol sighed in relief. Then she thought about the meaning of what they’d just said, and she gave a short scream.

“V-Vice President?!”

“Compose yourself, Carol.”

The vice president was completely back to his usual self, and both relief and resentment welled up inside her.

“I mean, Vice President! That means we won’t be able to leave this mansion! Besides, Rail and Frank…”

At that point, Carol timidly addressed her question to Placido instead.

“U-um… What are you…going to do with them?”

On suddenly finding himself spoken to, Placido narrowed his eyes for a moment. Then he responded slowly.

“Before I answer that question… Let me ask you one of my own, young lady. To keep things fair, see.”

“Y-yes?!”

“This Rail and whoever it was. What are they to you?”

“They… They’re my friends!”

Carol had stumbled over the words for a moment, but there was no uncertainty in her voice when she said them.

“Oh? Your boss here said you’d just met them today.”

“Th-that’s true, but… Still… We… We’re friends! I—I can’t think of another word for it, so…! I don’t really understand the idea of ‘passing acquaintances’ or things like that! S-so, um…”

Carol’s hands wandered through space as she answered, and the vice president exhaled quietly, but he sounded a little pleased as he spoke.

“That was clumsy, Carol. While foolish, it is also a virtue. I give you very nearly full marks.”

“V-Vice President!”

Carol’s face crumpled so badly that a bystander would have been unable to tell whether she was embarrassed, frightened, or about to cry.

Placido watched the young girl, thinking quietly, and finally said to her, “Uh-huh. I see, I see. In that case, when your friends come here, I’ll let you meet them. We may be able to use you to get them to behave.”

He wore an unpleasant smile as he spoke, which frightened Carol, but she nodded vigorously.

Once she had, Placido turned to the unflappable vice president and threatened him, bluffing with everything he had.

“Just to make sure you don’t try anything funny, I’m putting you and this young lady in separate rooms. We can’t have you colluding on us, see… Krieck!”

“Yes, boss.”

His subordinate bowed smoothly, and Placido issued an order, his expression cold.

“Get some sort of room ready for the guy. As for the girl… Put her in Lua’s room, and keep an eye on both of ’em.”

⟺

“My… What a lovely little guest.”

A woman spoke to Carol inside the room she had been taken to, deep in the Russo mansion.

She seemed to be the room’s current tenant. Apparently, like Carol, she was a prisoner.

When Carol looked at her, she sensed a sort of decadence about her. Her skin seemed nearly transparent, and her sad smile looked ready to shatter at a touch. The initial impression she gave was rather ghostlike.

“U-um… I’m sorry to intrude like this. It’s nice to meet you.”

“I’m Lua. It’s nice to meet you, too.”

“Oh, yes! I’m Carol! It’s a pleasure!”

It wasn’t clear what was “nice” or “pleasant” about this, and the other woman’s gentle demeanor made Carol more nervous. Just how long had she been trapped in this room? She wouldn’t go mad, would she? Or was she already insane?

The utter calm of the woman who’d introduced herself as Lua inspired such anxiety.

“Why have they brought you here, Carol?”



“Huh? Um… Well, it sounds like I’m a kind of hostage. I think…”

“My. In that case, you’re just like me.”

Lua smiled softly, and Carol looked at her blankly.

In the end, the girl didn’t know what to talk about and stayed uncomfortably silent. Lua simply gave her that gentle smile.

However, the smile did nothing to help Carol…

And so began the apprentice journalist’s life under house arrest.

⟺

Several days later Night Somewhere in Chicago

A few days had passed since the explosions in the city. Nothing else of note had happened.

Chicago seemed to be the very picture of peace, and the explosions Rail had caused the other day had all been tidied away as “accidents.”

“I don’t like it.”

With a scowl on his already grim face, Chi grumbled openly about the aftermath.

The arm Graham had dislocated probably still hurt or felt strange, and he rolled his shoulder every so often to check on the joint.

“So there’s clearly some force at work here, huh?” Sickle murmured.

Leeza’s disembodied voice echoed from the darkness. “Nebula, or Senator Beriam… Still, it looks as though the New York contingent has been exquisitely duped, so it’s probably best to assume Nebula.”

“O powerful numeric progression that drifts in the universe we call God! We a— Blaugh!”

“Close your mouth. We don’t need your bushwa right now.”

The Poet had been about to launch into some grandiose tirade, but Sickle had slammed the outer edge of her foot into his neck, and a temporary silence descended over them.

It was the same meeting spot from when they first came to the city.

The members of Lamia were gathered in a corner of the port near the forest, just as they had been a few days ago.

The only difference was that Rail wasn’t there.

On the day they’d first fought Graham, Rail’s smoke bombs had helped them get away for the moment— But he hadn’t shown up that night, not even when today became yesterday.

Thinking Graham must have gotten him, Chi and the others had enlisted the help of the twins and had them track him. However, they hadn’t gotten any information at all, and time had passed in vain.

Graham himself was striding around town with jaw-dropping boldness. He might have been worried his friends would be taken hostage; he never had any of them with him.

Not only that, but at night, he made the rounds at the pubs—to the point where it wasn’t clear when he slept—and he always sobered up in public squares or abandoned factories.

It was a blatant trap. And he was provoking them.

However, as a result, even when they tailed him, they hadn’t been able to find out anything about the organization that was backing him, and if they tried to mess with him, they’d have no chance of winning. He almost never gave them an opening, and it was hard even for Leeza to target him with a chakram from behind. And worse, if they killed him, they’d lose everything.

“That monster in the coveralls is probably waiting for us to approach him.”

Chi sounded irritated. Then he brought up the name of a certain man.

“I can feel it. Christopher could most likely win. However, it’s pointless to talk about someone who’s not here.”

“If you’re going to take that line, Rail’s not here, either,” Sickle answered sharply, and the conversation broke off for a little while.

The wind from the lake blew through, until the awkward silence was suddenly broken by a powerful whimper.

“Ngh, R-Raaaail… When I… When I ran away, if I’d only carried him, too, then…”

Frank was crying, his back shuddering, but Chi and the others didn’t reproach him for it.

“It’s over; don’t dwell on it. Unlike you, Rail can hide, and we had to scatter to escape.”

“That’s right. Either way, he’s the one who said to split up to make our getaway. I heard him, you know? That means whatever happens to Rail isn’t your fault, Frank. We’re only in this mess in the first place because Rail went ahead and—”

“Knock it off, Leeza,” Sickle snapped at thin air. “Quit trying to push the blame onto somebody. What is this, a corporation? The capitol building? Are we kids?”

“My! We are an organization, after all. You can’t tell me there’s no point in clarifying where responsibility lies.”

“If it wasn’t so patently obvious that you wanted to shove it onto Rail, I wouldn’t stop you. You’re free to hate him, Leeza, but right now, we

have to either confirm whether or not he's safe or prioritize Master Huey's orders and get to work on the mission. One of the two."

Leeza fell silent for a moment, and Sickle continued to glare into the night.

"W-wait. Don't fight, okay?"

As Sickle had her stare-down with the darkness, Frank only dithered, and the Poet was still clutching his throat and rolling around on the ground.

Chi gave a heavy sigh, probably tired of the whole mess, then spoke to Leeza, although there was no telling where she was.

"Never mind. Let's just move on. Leeza, we assembled here today either because there's been some sort of development regarding Rail or because Master Huey's issued instructions, correct?"

"…Bingo, Chi. Both of the above."

The tension between her and Sickle relaxed, and Leeza reverted to her usual self.

"The day after Rail disappeared, Master Huey gave permission. He's designated this city as the subject for the experiment instead of New York…he says."

"…Is that right? In that case, what have you been doing for the past few days?"

"My, you mustn't be impatient. If I hadn't gotten everything ready before I told you, you might have gone off on your own, like Rail."

After that snide remark at a certain someone's expense, Leeza reported a single result to the group.

"Then, over the course of several days, I put the twins to work, and they sent in some interesting information today. It's about that vile

workman… Listen, Chi. Do you remember the man saying something about how he ‘learned how to fight from my man Ladd’?”

“Hmm… Yes, he did shout something like that, didn’t he?”

“Does the name ‘Ladd’ ring a bell?”

“What?”

“Well, I’d completely forgotten, myself, until I had Sham check into it. We heard that name just about a year ago, in this very city.”

“What…?”

At Leeza’s revelation, Chi slowly searched his own memories.

It was true. One year ago, they’d visited this city for their side business, and during that time, they’d tangled with…

“…The Russo Family?”

Once, Chi had taken out several members of that mafia syndicate in the course of his work around here.

As he’d brutally slaughtered them, one of the wretched victims had screamed something.

“If Ladd were… If only Ladd were here, you two-bit hoods wouldn’t…”

Chi remembered that he’d responded, *“I don’t know who your Ladd is, but he’s not here now… That’s all that matters.”* He quietly raised his head.

“In other words…this ‘Ladd’ is connected to the Russo Family, and so that man in the coveralls is as well?”

“Bingo.”

Giggling happily, Leeza calmly began to relate the information she’d obtained.

“The fellow in the coveralls is Graham Specter. He was in the city several years back, and at the time, he acted as a sort of bodyguard for the Russo Family. It sounds as though he was in New York until just a little while ago, but he started some trouble with a mafia organization over there, so it’s possible that he took the opportunity to return to the Russos.”

Leeza was laughing merrily and issued orders regarding their next actions, as if that was the natural sequence to follow. Because she was their liaison with Huey, she was technically in a position to take charge. However, in this motley group, the word *leader* didn’t carry much value or real power.

Even so, no one argued with what she said, possibly because they agreed with the course of action for the most part.

“Tomorrow night, let’s go to the Russo mansion and ask their boss directly. We’ll find out exactly where he got that information on us.”

“D-do you think they have Rail there, too?”

“If he was snatched by the Russos, then yes. It’s also possible that another organization took him, or that he’s disappeared on his own, but… Even if he wants to rebel against Master Huey, I’d hope he isn’t stupid enough to betray him here.”

“R-Rail wouldn’t turn traitor. I-I’ll go, too. If Rail’s been caught, we have to save him.”

Frank was unusually enthusiastic about this, and Chi and Sickle wordlessly agreed with him.

“That’s settled, then. Either way, we’ll have to properly remove all obstacles in order to thoroughly execute Master Huey’s instructions.”

Leeza sounded satisfied, but Sickle spoke up, still seeming cross.

“Yeah, but… Having that information doesn’t change the fact that this Graham guy is a tough customer. Are we going to poison him? If we want to set a bomb, we need Rail, and Rail’s missing.”

“Dear me. That’s the trouble with people who only know how to fight. We’ll just do it when he’s not around, and besides…”

With a musical, mocking laugh, Leeza coolly revealed her trump card.

“…we have a hostage.”

“What?”

“It doesn’t sound as if he has a sweetheart, his family’s dead, and he doesn’t seem to have any important people in his life. According to the twins, though, he has a sworn little brother of a sort in New York… And then I hear he has so much faith in that Ladd fellow that you’d think the man was a god,” Leeza said calmly.

Looking dissatisfied, Sickle muttered, “I see. Larva’s in New York, so we’ll have them move, huh?”

“No. We’ve got the perfect opportunity to take Ladd hostage.”

“Wait, but that’s… Isn’t he the guy who taught that monster how to fight?”

They wouldn’t be able to catch him that easily, would they?

As if making fun of Chi and Sickle’s doubts, Leeza giggled.

“It’s fine. Actually, he’ll be easier than the one in New York.”

“?”

“It sounds as though the boy in New York has a scary bodyguard, as well as my big sister…”

What’s this “big sister” business?

Before Sickle could ask, Leeza confidently went on in the darkness.

“Our boy Ladd is very close to Master Huey right now.”

“He’s an inmate in Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary.”

⟺

He was dreaming.

One long memory, from the time he’d been given the name “Rail,” from when his ego and memories had begun to grow, up until now…

The dream simply flowed on.

He and the others were created beings, and even within Huey’s organizations, their position was unique. That was how Rail understood it.

Neither human nor truly immortal. They were incomplete homunculi who only refused to age, negating natural laws in a half-hearted way. It hadn’t yet been fifteen years since Rail’s creation, and his mental age was only slightly higher than his appearance suggested.

He’d realized he was something that should not exist about five years ago.

That was when Huey Laforet had cut up his entire body.

He would almost rather have been sliced apart by a murderer who enjoyed the sight of blood.

Rail’s mind had been hazy, but he’d seen the researchers who worked under Huey performing their tasks with perfectly normal expressions.

They had less emotion about this than they had about dissecting an experimental frog, and the work was extremely simple, like boiling a saline solution and extracting the salt. That was the look he saw in the men’s eyes as they made their incisions, dispassionately, silently, with no joy or sadness.

Huh? I'm…a thing.

That was what Rail thought as he was anesthetized and lacerated, while the pain gradually disappeared.

If their eyes had been smiling or hate-filled, at least, like children who were cutting a doll apart, it might have helped a little.

He'd felt he was alive up until that moment, when the fact was utterly negated.

The boy was still young, and his heart wasn't able to process the idea very well. He wouldn't know it was actually true until several years later.

He didn't even have the right to live.

Apparently, this world gave them special treatment, in a bad way.

I'm not a person. I'm a thing… At least, I am as far as Huey's concerned.

Rail had gradually begun to understand the relationship between himself and the world, and in the darkness of the laboratory, he thought and thought.

In that case, what if I think about it like this?

"We're a breed completely apart from Nature."

As a matter of fact, the beings like himself whom he'd met at the research facility had seemed far superior to ordinary humans. Granted, the only ordinary humans Rail had been exposed to were in the newspaper or on the radio, the researchers, and the people in the little town he was permitted to visit under guard.

Still, even when his first job took him to a big city, none of the humans in it were beyond what he'd imagined.

Hunh. They can't surpass my imagination. So that's all humans are.

To Rail, that was everything, and it was safe to say that he'd been able to live and thrive for this long because of that sense of superiority.

And that was why he'd had so much trouble believing the rumor that Christopher had lost to a human last year.

When he'd first heard about it from Leeza, he'd thought she was lying. However, Chi had told him, *The man who defeated Christopher is probably some sort of cryptid or legendary wizard. Don't mess with him*, so he'd had no choice but to believe it.

Chi wasn't a liar, and more troublingly, he hadn't seen Christopher since.

Right after Rail's dissection, Christopher had been the one who'd looked after him the most, and Rail's young eyes had watched him up close for a long time. He had come to hold a deep conviction that Christopher was the strongest person in the world.

And he had lost.

Even worse, he'd lost not to an immortal or another homunculus—but to a mere human.

The fact was difficult to accept, and Rail had brooded quietly.

My big brother Christopher lost…?

Leeza had said, "Chris still has a long way to go, too. That's all," but Rail had never felt disappointed in Christopher. After all, he'd prided himself that he understood Christopher's true skills better than absolutely anybody else.

In that case, he'd have to raise his opinion of humans.

Confronted with a reality that was hard to swallow, Rail had made it his life's goal to deny it. He'd always assumed he was superior to humans, but—

That Graham guy had shattered his belief.

As dream and memory mingled, Rail sensed the man in the blue coveralls stirring—and the woman in the lab coat peeked out from his shadow.

Stop it… Stay back, get away…

"Sto…it… Stay…back…way…"

Help me, help me…

"…lp…he…lp m…"

Save me…Christopher…Christopher!

"…me…ris…topher… Christopher!"

Just then—

As Rail screamed in his dream, without warning, a response reached his ears from reality.

"What?"

Save… Huh?

"…Save… Huh?"

Then Rail woke up.

When his eyes, which were just barely open, caught sight of crimson eyes and rows of fangs—he thought he'd woken into another dream.

⇔

The Russo mansion

When he saw Christopher's face, Rail murmured, completely unable to understand the situation.

"Huh? Am I…dreaming?"

As it dawned on him he'd been reliving memories in a dream, Rail began to doubt what he was seeing now— But it all seemed much too real for that.

His whole body groaned, but he forced himself to sit up. At that point, he realized he was lying on a bed.

A familiar figure in an unfamiliar room.

Even as he wondered whether this were a dream after all, Christopher's mouth full of fangs curved into a grin.

"Oh, you're up, you're up, you're finally up. You started talking in your sleep, so I thought you might be waking up soon, and I'm so glad you didn't let me down! For starters, I've prepared three options for demonstrating my delight. One, catch a random girl and kiss her. Two, catch a random frog and kiss it. Three, with a little effort, kiss myself. Which would you prefer? Parenthetically, with regard to three, I could actually just kiss the palm of my hand, which wouldn't involve any hard work at all. I recommend One. What'll it be?"

"…Two…?"

"Right, thank you for your cooperation with this survey. Winners will receive their prize upon implementation of their choice… Well anyway, that's great. If you've got the judgment to pick the very worst answer, you're probably fine now, in several ways."

"Never mind that… Christopher?"

Gradually waking from his daze, Rail opened his eyes wide and asked the man sitting in a chair in front of him.

“Is that…? Is that actually you, Chris?”

“If it’s not, I’ll be really surprised. If it’s a doppelgänger, I’m extremely curious about how it’s going to haunt the actual me to death. Besides…having a doppelgänger seems pretty human, and I like it.”

His senselessly nutty words and behavior convinced Rail that this really was Christopher—

And the next thing he knew, his eyes were tearing up a little.

“Wow. I know this is a touching reunion, but really? Is it momentous enough to cry over?”

“Chris… You’re alive! I knew you were alive! Ha-ha… Ah-ha-ha!”

Rail awkwardly sat up, faced Christopher, and smiled from the bottom of his heart. This wasn’t his usual, hedonistic, sarcasm-filled smile. His face was filled with honest, childlike delight, and the tears he shed were genuine.

For his part, Christopher patted Rail on the head, gave a wry smile tinged with a hint of surprise, and murmured:

“…That’s a bit of a shock. I’m positively nonplussed. Hmm? What? Am I supposed to be dead? Says who? Leeza? It was Leeza, wasn’t it? I can’t think of anybody else who’d hold a funeral for someone who’s still alive without telling them. Well, what’s done is done. Let’s trust that the judgment of Nature will fall on her someday. That cave crickets specifically will judge her by always jumping straight at her.”

“This is no time for judgment. Seriously, where have you been up till now?!”

He was the same old Christopher, to an infuriating degree, and Rail wiped away his tears, yelling angrily.

“You cry, you smile, you get mad… Are you emotionally unstable, Rail?! Actually, I’m the one with questions! Why were you literally hoist with your own petard and injured so badly back there?! Why are you even in this town?! Frank was always with you; where is he?! Does the Poet still have bats in his belfry?!”

“My questions come first! Where have you been?! What’s the deal with you losing a fight with a puny human?! And actually, where are we?! How did you find me?! What happened to the corpses of that group in lab coats?! Also, the Poet’s got even more bats lately!”

They each interrogated the other, and just as it seemed as if things were never going to get anywhere…

A coolheaded interjection came sharply between them, clearing the mood in the room.

“Quiet down.”

Startled by the sudden interruption from a third party, Rail looked in that direction.

His eyes landed on a kid who seemed to be about his own age. He was sitting on a wood-frame sofa, pointedly turning up the volume on a radio.

“There’s almost nobody in the mansion right now, but even so, they’ll notice if you’re noisy. There’s only so much I can cover up, you know.”

“…Wh-who’s that?”

Could he be a new Lamia member?

Rail had directed his question at Christopher, but the blond kid answered it before he could.

“I’m Ricardo Russo. Nice to meet you.”

“Huh…? Um, nice to meet you, too?”

As Rail responded involuntarily, the question marks in his head multiplied.

Completely ignoring Rail’s curiosity, Ricardo spoke, as expressionless as ever.

“If you’re awake, that’s good. From now on, though, it’s best if you hide in there to make sure no one from the house finds you.”

As Ricardo spoke, he pointed to a stairway that led to an attic storage space.

Completely unable to process the current situation, Rail gazed at the darkness beyond the ceiling.

“You tell some pretty funny jokes. Ha-ha…”

“No, shockingly, that wasn’t a joke, Rail.”

“You too, Chris? Hang on a minute, um… I don’t really get it, but I do know you saved me, all right? I’m grateful, but…frankly, I have no idea what’s going on.”

Rail’s mind was inundated with questions, and his smile was acquiring a cynical edge.

In response to Rail’s complaint, Christopher picked up a piece of paper from the bedside table.

“Hmm. I’m not sure how to put this, Rail. See, I don’t understand the situation, either.”

Rail’s body was still waking up, but when he saw that piece of paper—he froze.

“What on earth did you people get up to while I was gone? If Ricardo hadn’t seen this wanted poster, they would have caught you, you know.”

The paper Christopher had shown him held the same information as the wanted poster Rail had blown up the other day, the one that had featured them.

“Why do you have this, Chris?!”

Then something occurred to Rail, and he gasped.

The wanted poster described them in detail—but although Christopher was a lot more distinctive than the Poet or Sickle in terms of looks, he wasn’t mentioned at all.

A certain horrifying idea flickered through his mind, and Rail fearfully asked:

“No… It can’t be. You didn’t… Chris, did you sell us out?!”

“Wow. Your imagination is impressive. Still, I hate that I can follow your train of thought to that conclusion. I understand how it happened, so I can’t argue with it. Is this…the judgment of Nature?!”

Chris was clearly troubled, and Rail squeezed his hand. His eyes were shining.

“Why didn’t you ask me to join you?! If you’re selling out Huey, I’ll do that all day! I was thinking I’d blow him up one of these days anyway!”

“Whoa. Your optimism is also impressive. Actually, it looks like you hate Huey even more than you did last time I saw you. I bet Leeza’s real upset with you about that.”

The conversation had begun to veer off track yet again, and neither Rail nor Christopher was any closer to understanding the other's situation.

As he watched the two swapping new questions and self-centered delusions, Ricardo gave a great sigh, and—

"I'm only saying this because I don't think you two will be able to come back if you keep this up."

In a sullen voice, he told them how to move the conversation along.

"For now, why don't you start by each describing your own situation?"

⇔

The Russo mansion Placido's room

"Dammit… So since then, you haven't found even one of them?"

At the sound of Placido's low voice, the small group of men in the room looked at one another uncomfortably.

"I hear that bastard Graham thrashed them good. You'd better not tell me they got cold feet and skipped town."

"We do have people watching the stations and the major streets, but…"

Krieck and the others also seemed rather anxious about the stalemate, less sure than they had been a few days ago.

"Tch! If the Nebula crew thinks we're useless, we're all washed up. Do you understand that?"

Placido sounded irritated, and on an impulse, he called to one of his subordinates.

“That monocled gink says he’s an information broker; go ask him if he has any ideas.”

The vice president of the information brokerage, who’d been summoned immediately, spoke calmly.

“I do not know what it is you are looking for, but—my contact with the outside world has been severed. How do you suppose I could obtain information regarding the present situation? With all due respect, sir.”

The position he’d been placed in didn’t seem to bother him in the least. As a matter of fact, he behaved as if he had the advantage.

“…In that case, go pick up sources or anything you want. Just don’t forget: We’re holding the little girl and the camera hostage.”

“I am well aware.”

Even when Placido reminded him of Carol’s circumstances, he didn’t seem the slightest bit daunted.

As if to signal the end of the discussion, he marched out of the mansion without a wasted step.

Once Krieck was sure the vice president had left the room, he spoke to Placido, lowering one eyebrow in a frown.

“Boss, can we trust him? He might leave the kid and make a break for it.”

“He’s probably been a phony all along anyway. If that happens, just sell off the kid and the camera.”

Admitting he’d simply grasped at straws, Placido settled farther back in his chair.

“That rat Ladd will be back next month. We’ve got to pull our shit together before then.”

“Do you think Nebula will actually keep that promise? You know… About that drug or liquor or whatever it is, for perfect immortality. Will they really get it for us?”

“At this point, promises don’t matter. Ultimately, we just have to get as many cards in our hand as we can. And to that end, hurry up and bring me those brats from the wanted poster.”

Holding onto his bullish attitude to the end, Placido gave a relaxed, confident smile meant to reassure his henchmen.

“Hey, if it comes down to it, we’ll get Nebula to listen to us even if we have to threaten ’em.

“They don’t know jack about this side of the law. We’ll just have to show them, loud and clear, that we’ve got the bulge when it comes to fighting.”

⟺

The Russo mansion Attic room

It might have been an attic, but it was hardly cluttered with junk. The space was rather roomy, and it still smelled like wood.

Chris lay in the center of that room, while Rail was leaning back in a corner.

It had been several hours since he’d woken up. After they’d each given the other their story, Rail had gone rather quiet, and for a little while, all he’d done was sit silently in a corner of the attic room.

Finally, puzzled by the silence, Christopher got up, then crouched down in front of Rail.

“Say, Rail? You look a little cranky.”

“I’m not.”

Rail averted his face as he answered, and Christopher smiled with amusement.

“Let me guess why you’re in a bad mood: ‘What the hell?! What’s wrong with that stupid Chris?! He showed me potential that surpassed humans and let me believe we were superior to humans, but now…! Now he’s made friends with a mere human kid! If Chris ends up on equal footing with humans, what are we—? What am *I* supposed to do?!’ Is it something like that? I’m pretty confident in the theory myself.”

On hearing Christopher’s monologue, Rail gaped uselessly for a little while. Then, he heaved a big sigh of defeat and shook his head.

“…Thanks for putting my frustration into words. You made me feel better. I didn’t really understand why I was feeling so dismal.”

Rail finally turned to look at Chris, and his eyes were just a little angry.

“If I were going to add to that, I’d say, ‘Not only that, but why would he make friends with a sulky, dainty little guy like him, of all people?!’ Ha-ha!”

“Rail… He can hear you down there, you know?”

“Like I care? And anyway, what is this room? At first I thought it was a hotel or something, and you’re telling me it’s a kid’s room? What’s up with that? He’s just about my age, but he’s got his own personal bathroom… Ah-ha-ha-ha! So, what, you really did want to live the rich life, Chris?”

“Well, of course.”

As the pupils in those red eyes focused on him, Rail fell silent in spite of himself.

Exhaling slightly, Christopher grinned with his mouthful of fangs, then went on.

“I want to live like the rich, and the poor, and the sick, and the soldiers, and the commoners, and the powerful. If it’s a natural human activity, then no matter what the ‘it’ is, I’ll probably keep longing for it. Being able to yearn for something is a really, really good thing, you know?”

He stopped smiling then and stroked Rail’s head a little awkwardly.

“Without dreams…living a long time hurts too much for unnatural beings like us.”

Looking embarrassed, Rail sighed and slowly brushed away the hand on his head.

As they were talking, they heard a *creak* from a corner of the attic room.

When they turned to look, Ricardo had climbed up the ladder, and his upper half was poking into the room. He must have heard them talking, but his expression was cool as he spoke to them, as if to say he didn’t care.

“Rail, wasn’t it? Tomorrow, I’ll make up another errand and carry you outside. Until then, I wouldn’t wander around inside the mansion if I were you. The syndicate’s all worked up because they can’t find your group.”

“…Carry me outside?”

“Yeah. When we brought you in here, we bought that traveler’s bag and packed you and your stuff into it.”

When he looked, he saw a big suitcase sitting in the corner of the room with Rail's things peeking out of its open mouth.

What a cheap-looking ambulance. I should be laughing, but it's not even funny.

Rail sighed, and Ricardo coldly told him, "We bought it specifically to transport you, so we'll have to be careful not to let it go to waste."

"You sure do rub folks the wrong way, don't you? Want me to set off a bomb right here and start a big stink in your house? If they find out you've been harboring the guy from their wanted poster, you'll be in trouble, too."

His sarcastic comment could have been taken as a threat, but Ricardo gave a small sigh and left the attic room with a retort that wasn't the least bit flustered.

"Maybe for me, but you wouldn't want to cause trouble for Chris, would you?"

When the sound of the ladder was gone, Rail spat out a comment without bothering to lower his voice.

"I'm really not gonna like that guy."

"Oh? I thought you'd hit it off perfectly. I'll have to introduce Frank to him one of these days, too."

Christopher snickered, and Rail puffed his cheeks out and protested.

"Don't you dare! Sure, I'm grateful he helped me, but…there's no reason to cop an attitude with a guy he just met!"

"Well, he's still a kid, and he probably has trouble keeping his actual feelings separate from his public mask. Although, personally, I don't even try."

“What sorts of feelings, huh?” Rail asked with an unsettlingly steady gaze, but Christopher answered with confidence.

“I bet he thinks you’re going to take me away, his one and only friend, and he’s jealous of you!”

“…”

“What do you think?”

“I think it’s really great that you’ve got the nerve to say something like that about yourself straight out. Not only that, but it sounds like it could be the right answer. It’s scary.”

Rail smiled thinly, breaking out in a cold sweat, and Christopher responded.

“What did I tell you, Rail? It’s all due to my aspirations.”

“I’ve spent decades idolizing humans and Nature…and I was always observing them.”

⇔

That night In front of the Russo mansion

The Russo mansion stood on the outskirts of Chicago, and as far as the public was concerned, it looked like a castle built on success.

The grand residence had been built with a wide margin between it and the surrounding houses.

While its yard wasn’t as spacious as a park, there was enough room to build another house both in front of and behind the mansion, and a sturdy double wall made of bricks surrounded the perimeter.

At that moment, on the darkened avenue…

Gatekeepers stood around the Russo mansion, with only the light from the streetlamps to rely on.

Naturally, the mansion didn't have guards posted at its entrance like a royal palace or a checkpoint would. Several small groups of the family's men were just stationed under streetlamps nearby, pretending to shoot the breeze with one another.

They had guns inside their jackets, of course, and although they seemed to be having a casual chat, they were keeping a wary eye on everything in sight.

And on one corner… A group of men talking fairly close to the back entrance spotted a man walking their way, even though it was the middle of the night.

For a little while, they thought he might just be a passerby and watched him as they feigned conversation, but…the man, who wore his hat pulled down low, was making a beeline straight for them.

"…"

Warily, the men watched him, waiting to see what he'd do.

The man in the hat abruptly stopped right in front of the group and spoke to them.

"May I ask you a question? Is this the residence of Mr. Placido Russo?"

"If you've got a question for somebody, take off your lid, buddy."

"…My apologies."

No sooner had he spoken than the man ever-so-naturally pushed up the brim of his hat with a finger…

…and revealed his eyes from its shadow.

The next moment, a pale, unsteady light leaped into the men's brains.

It was coming from the man's eyes after he raised his hat.

They washed out the light of the streetlamps, reflecting it at the men.

The pale light flickered strangely, quietly touching their retinas, stealing into the men's minds, and into their time.

"Huh…uh?"

In time with the wavering light, the man with the hat began to speak, slowly.

"Good work, men. Your shift is over."

"…Wha…? Oh…uh…huh… Uh-huh?"

They seemed half-asleep. The moment they saw his pale eyes, the three men felt as if they'd been trapped in a daydream.

"The keys to the back gate, please."

"Uh…sure."

Dazedly, the leader obediently took the keys out of his jacket.

Accepting them, the man with the hat kept his eyes on the others and slowly intoned:

"…You are at ease. You've been to the bathroom, and you won't get dirty if you sleep here. Most important of all…I've taken over your guard duties for you…so you have nothing to worry about, do you? Go on… You're…"

The men realized that the man's voice was gradually receding…

But the urge to sleep that welled up inside them completely pushed away all further thought.

Sickle, Chi, and Frank had been watching the Poet talk to the men, who seemed to be guards. When they saw the men slowly lean back against the wall, they walked over to the Poet as well.

He'd already resettled his hat low over his eyes, and—in the presence of the unconscious men—he inebriated himself on his own words in a voice that was quieter than usual.

"Ohhh, ohhh, 'tis the apple on my back that extended these keys to me. The apple calls to me: 'With these keys, open the wheel of the verdant caterpillar and bring my heart to its conclusion.' My sin is—"

"Forget that; just fork 'em over."

Without listening to a word he said, Sickle snatched the keys to the back entrance out of the Poet's hand. There were two different keys; one seemed to open the big gate for cars, while the other was for the service entrance beside it.

"Still… We didn't have to do this. We could have just had Leeza tell us the enemy's positions and taken them out one by one. Where the heck is she anyway?"

Chi responded to Sickle's mechanical-sounding question with a sigh.

"Well… I don't know why, but I've been calling Leeza over and over for the past hour, and there's no response."

"…Isn't that…bad?"

"My thoughts exactly, but…" Chi scowled.

Behind him, Frank was trembling. "D-do you think they caught Leeza, too?"

The moment he turned his frightened eyes on his surroundings…

…Leeza's voice reached them, although it was softer than usual.

“…I-I’m…here. I’m here…”

“Oh, so you *are* here… What’s wrong?”

The voice was clearly Leeza’s, but it was definitely not her usual tone. Ordinarily, she spoke like a confident, composed adult woman, but now she seemed extremely anxious, like someone cornered.

“Nothing! There’s no point in telling you about it when you’re all the way over there!”

Her response to Sickle was slightly delayed, loud, and hysterical.

“Never mind… You just focus on doing your job! I’ll… Oh, oh, hurry, I have to hurry and wake up… I have to wake up…”

“?”

The odd voice echoed in thin air for a little while, then disappeared.

“…What was that about?”

Sickle and the others were still gazing into empty space, but Frank spoke up, fidgeting restlessly.

“A-anyway, for now, rescuing Rail comes first.”

Realizing he was right, Sickle sighed and issued orders to her comrades.

“We’ve gotta do what we’ve gotta do. Let’s get on with the job. The question is: Are there guards inside…? If they see you or me opening the gate, Chi, they’ll catch on to the fact that we’re outsiders right away. Poet, it’s all on you.”

She wasn’t the provisional leader, but somebody had to speak up or they’d be dead in the water, and no one objected.

Nodding obediently, the Poet took the keys and headed for the rear service entrance.

Thinking of Frank's huge build, he'd considered opening the gate to the driveway, but—

"Don't do anything obvious."

The driveway gate was clearly visible from the mansion, which made Chi uneasy. He issued orders to the Poet and Frank.

"You wait here for a bit, Frank. If they're holding Rail in there, it would be better if we avoided calling any attention to ourselves until the very last minute. Poet, open the service entrance."

"Oh…okay."

Frank very nearly made a face that said he wanted to go to the rescue himself, but he shut his mouth and nodded firmly. There were no objections from the Poet, either, and he unlocked the service entrance.

There was a tiny *click*, the door creaked, and Chi quietly sized up the situation inside.

No one seemed to be around, and they'd probably be able to use the garden trees as cover all the way to the house.

"Right… Poet, you wait here with Frank."

"Once we've cleaned up inside, we'll call you and get them to cough up Rail's location."

After Chi and Sickle had gone, the Poet and Frank waited on the corner near the sleeping gangsters from a few moments earlier.

"The dark night is lunacy, a strongbox with heaven and earth inverted. It locks away the sin of the purified streetlamp, softly working it into the light of the stars…for that is the will of the venerable old gentleman's wife."

"Uhhh… I-I'm sorry. I can't understand a word you're saying, Mr. Poet."

The Poet gazed into thin air as he spoke, and Frank expressed a fairly average opinion.

However, the Poet didn't mind a bit. While insane words were leaving his lips, in his heart, he was calmly analyzing himself.

This power is as eerie as ever.

Looking at the trio asleep at his feet, the Poet thought about his own eyes.

After all, even I don't understand the principles behind it.

That didn't get in the way of his work, though.

As usual, as long as he accomplished his behind-the-scenes tasks, Chi and Sickle, who specialized in the rougher business, would take care of everything else.

The scene was the same as always. Nothing about it had changed.

However… Today, somehow, the atmosphere was different.

An enemy tougher than any they'd faced in the past. Rail's disappearance. Leeza's strange condition.

And despite the string of oddities, he was still under orders to stand here with no reservations.

Something is…off. What is it? This feels wrong…

It was as if they had been called to this mansion not by their own wills or destinies, but by the hand of someone completely unknown to them.

That creepy sensation lingered around the Poet, and it refused to go away.

⟺

The Russo mansion Front entrance

About the time the Poet was putting the guards near the rear entrance to sleep…

…something strange was happening at the front entrance as well.

Right in front of the guards, a large, oddly shaped vehicle that looked like a cross between a bus and a truck was slowly approaching the Russo mansion's main gate.

The big vehicle sported a shining Nebula logo, and it came to a temporary stop in front of the entrance.

A woman got out of the passenger seat…

…and took a dramatic tumble, possibly because she'd misjudged the distance between the truck and the ground.

"Yeek?! …Ow, ow, ow… I-I'm sorry." After an apology that wasn't clearly addressed to anyone, she brushed the dust off her clothes and said to one of the guards, "Um… I think Mr. Placido's probably told you, but…"

"Oh… The 'regular checkup.'"

"Yes, yes, that's right!"

Several men had begun collecting near the main gate, little by little, and they took a good look at the woman.

Realizing that this was a guest who stopped by from time to time, they shared a glance.

"Russo did mention you might drop by, but… What's the truck for?"

She'd only ever driven up in a passenger car, and her arrival in a rugged truck was perplexing.

Finding herself the subject of doubt, the guest—Renee—cocked her head, looking troubled.

“Um… I need quite a few people for today’s checkup, so I brought my subordinates along!”

No sooner had she spoken than the truck’s cargo door opened—and a man in a white coat emerged from the fully enclosed interior.

“Wha…?”

After that first man came another, and another, and another, and…

“H-hold the phone…”

Even as the guard spoke, the endless stream of people continued climbing out of the back.

They all carried medical bags, and at first glance, they looked like doctors or pharmacists on a business call.

For that very reason, the group of more than twenty of them exuded the spooky, intimidating air of the impossible.

“H-hey… What’s…?”

The guards were clearly dismayed, and Renee flashed them an artless smile from behind her glasses.

“Oh, we’ll be taking the truck onto the grounds, too, but please don’t worry about it, all right? We may have quite a lot of things to collect today!”

“Well, I mean, maybe you do, but you can’t do this, we’ve got…got…got…”

The guard who’d been beside Renee suddenly repeated the word several times, and then he crashed to the ground.

“Huh? What happened?”

Renee looked past the fallen man to the figure in the lab coat behind him. The person was holding a syringe, and when she looked around, all the assembled guards had fallen like the first one.

“Director, this was going to be a pain, so we just knocked them out.”

The man in the lab coat gave his report indifferently, and Renee’s reply sounded flustered.

“Uh, um, wait just a minute, please! You need to report that sort of thing to me, or—”

“I just did.”

Renee thought about that for a little while. Then she clapped her hands together lightly and spoke with a gentle smile.

“…I see! That’s all right, then! Take the truck inside, then around to the back!

“After all, if we end up transporting corpses or something, we’ll get in trouble if they spot us.”

⟺

Placido’s room

“Dammit… That information broker just isn’t coming back…”

The situation was showing no signs of improvement, and Placido’s frustration was growing, but…

The telephone abruptly rang, and he immediately reached for the glossy black receiver.

“…It’s me,” he answered imperiously, and a perfectly calm voice responded from the other end of the line.

"Well, well. I'm pleased to find you in such excellent spirits, valued customer."

This phone call from the man he'd just been talking about left Placido a bit nonplussed.

He isn't watching me from somewhere, is he?

Suspicious, Placido stayed silent, but the man on the phone—St. Germain—ignored his state of mind and spoke indifferently.

"Now, then… As it happens, I have acquired some information that must be relayed to you promptly, so I have taken the liberty of contacting you by telephone."

"What is it?! Do you know where they are?!"

"No, no, sir. This matter is of far greater importance to you than that standing issue."

He spoke in an affected manner, but there was a fluent rhythm to the words. After pausing for the space of a breath, the vice president gave Placido a brilliantly smooth warning.

"If you value your life, you should flee the mansion immediately. Trust no one."

"What…?"

"I recommend you distance yourself from the state of Illinois as speedily as possible."

"What do you mean?! Get back here and explain yourself!" Placido yelled—he had no idea what was going on—but the vice president responded courteously.

"Our business relationship, while brief, was truly fulfilling as far as I am concerned. I intend to come and collect Carol immediately. Should we happen to meet while you are still among the living, I will give a detailed explanation at that time."

With that, the information broker hung up on him.

“Dammit, what the hell is he playing at?!”

It had seemed as if the information broker was trying to alert him to some sort of danger, but—

The way I am now*, I don’t need stuff like that!*

As he remembered his own physical state, Placido’s irritation about the information broker’s telephone call grew.

“Come to collect her…? Don’t gimme that bullshit…”

It looked like he was going to have to give him a little reminder about the position he was in.

Should he bring that little girl here and punch her lights out right in front of him?

He began to call for one of his men, planning to order him to bring Carol to him, but—

Before he could say anything, the door opened, and a strange figure stepped out of the shadows.

It was an Asian man, dressed in the clothes of some foreign country, with iron claws on both his hands.

Wha…?!

His heart thudded, once.

Another shape emerged from the Asian man’s shadow—it was a woman in a green dress, and her murmur landed an additional blow.

“So you’re Placido, huh?” Her voice was female, but her manner of speech was masculine.

Placido ground his molars together.

“You… You’re from the wanted poster…!”

“We came to ask you who gave you that wanted poster,” Chi muttered calmly, closing the distance between himself and Placido little by little.

“S-somebody…”

“Everyone who was near this room is asleep.”

As Sickle responded to Placido, she began to circle around his desk from the side opposite Chi’s. They had him caught perfectly in between them, and Chi shook his head, as if he hadn’t wanted to take the measures he did.

“Although several of them may never wake up.”

“Rrgh…”

Slowly, Chi’s blades bore down on Placido, and just then—

With a *creak*, the large double doors that led to another entrance—not the one that Chi and Sickle had used—opened, and a peculiar group marched right into the tense atmosphere the pair had created.

The woman at the center of the group in white softened the mood around her with a carefree smile.

“Good evening, Mr. Placido! I’m sorry to be so late… Um, huh?” Somewhat disconcerted as she belatedly registered the situation in the room, she asked, “Um… What’s going on here?”

Any ordinary person would probably have thought, *Are they making the rounds of some big hospital or something?*

However, both Sickle and Chi were remembering something they’d seen before: the group of researchers in lab coats at Huey’s facility.

While the two of them froze up at the unpleasant memory, Placido’s face shone as if he’d seen a ray of hope.

“Oh, ohhh, you’ve come at an excellent time! These guys are from that wanted poster, ain’t they, ma’am?”

—?!

Hearing how politely Placido addressed the woman, Chi and Sickle’s intuition led them to one conclusion.

This group might be the masterminds who’d given that wanted poster to the Russo Family.

“Don’t move.”

As if to say that this would save them time, Chi set the tips of his iron claws against Placido’s neck, just to see what would happen.

He’d meant to watch how the others responded, in order to find out whether the man would work as a hostage or not, but—

That group in lab coats really wasn’t playing along.

“Um…”

Placido had blades pressed to his neck and couldn’t even talk, but Renee, on the opposite side of the room, took a look at him, tilted her head to one side, and spoke to the white-clad group around her.



“In situations like this, what are you supposed to say before you *start something*?”

Renee’s words sounded troubled, and the individuals in lab coats began to give their opinions in incredibly laid-back tones.

“Wouldn’t ‘Fire’ work okay?” “Kind of bland, though.”

“Try ‘Showtime,’ Director!” “Don’t you need an *It’s* before that?”

“I’m partial to ‘Shall we dance?’” “Nice.” “Yeah, maybe that.”

“Erm, possibly ‘Now then, gentlemen, let us commence.’” “What movie is that from?” “Could be a book.”

“For now, I think it would be best if you stripped off your coat and gave a few pants.” “Agreed.” “Agreed.” “Agreed.” “Agreed.” “Agreed.”

“Eeeeeeeeeeep?!”

As Renee shrieked at that last suggestion, another white-coated individual ignored her and spoke up.

“Uh, Director?” he said nonchalantly, reaching into his lab coat. “Why don’t we just go ahead and shoot?”

Right as the man finished speaking, fire erupted from the pistol that had emerged.

“Oh.” “He fired.” “Director, what should we do?” “Oh, she’s plugging her ears.” “Eh, never mind.”

No sooner had they spoken than…

…as if there was no hostage at all…

…the men in lab coats took guns from their coats one after another, firing all at once at Chi and Sickle by the window.

⟺

The attic room

As he listened to the sound of water that filtered up through the ceiling, Rail grumbled with a smile that didn't go past his lips.

"You know, I gotta say, having a shower in your own room is ritzy. There's nothing else to call it."

"I think you're right."

"And not only is it indulgent, but if even your shower is detached, you'll lose your emotional attachments to other humans, you know?"

Rail shook his head wearily, and just as he was about to start complaining again—

—another noise mingled with the sound of the water.

The source was outside the room, somewhere distant…but it was very clearly not part of the daily routine. That said, to Christopher and Rail, it was deeply familiar.

"Gunshots…?"

"Yep."

Christopher nodded in response to Rail's murmur, and his eyes sparkled in enjoyment.

"Maybe somebody's come to take you back, Rail."

The moment the muttered joke left his mouth, they realized the sound of water downstairs had stopped.

Next, they heard the bathroom door open, and Rail took that as his signal to start down to the lower floor.

“It sounds like something’s up, doesn’t it? I bet even you can’t keep up that poker face about everything, right?”

With that sarcastic question, Rail jumped down from the ladder. Ricardo, who was briskly toweling himself down, responded with his usual impassive expression.

“They may have come to take you back. Someone might have seen us transporting you.”

Rail had been hoping to see him anxious, frightened, and trembling, and he was utterly disappointed by what he’d gotten instead. Ricardo didn’t seem to care how the other boy looked, though, and he calmly began to get dressed.

He quickly pulled on his underwear, headed for the hanger with his jacket and trousers, and took the ones he used for going out. Given that he’d opted not to put on the pajamas he’d had ready in the bathroom, he must have grasped that the situation was urgent.

Boring.

Rail was annoyed by Ricardo’s cool attitude, but on the other hand, he had noticed an incongruity. He turned to Christopher and fell silent for a little while.

“…”

Beside Rail, who was being oddly quiet, Christopher’s red eyes and fangs glinted with energy.

“Well? What do you want to do? Should we shut ourselves up in the room and hide? Should we go see what’s up and figure out a way to make a run for it? Or— If an enemy’s here, should we kill them before they kill us?”

Christopher posed unpleasant alternatives—siege, retreat, or ambush—and Ricardo fell silent for a few seconds.

Then he issued instructions to Christopher, as his employer.

“Either way, it would be bad if they found Rail after an uproar like this, so…let’s run for it. The three of us.”

That was an unexpected answer for Rail, and it ended up pushing him into an even deeper silence.

⟺

Ten minutes earlier The ruins of an abandoned factory Somewhere in Chicago

It was an industrial area relatively near the Russo mansion.

Inside one of several factories that had gone under due to the Depression, a man was waiting for his enemies once again.

All alone, Graham sat on the hood of a car minus all its tires and toyed with his beloved wrench.

Several days had passed since he’d begun to use himself as bait, but so far, the enemies he’d fought that day had failed to bite.

His friends had warned him, “You’re about the only idiot who’d fall for a trap that obvious, Mr. Graham!” but he’d insisted, “No, I believe in them. I only crossed wrenches with ’em once, but I could tell; they’re like me!” …And this had been the result.

“Aah… Sad… How incredibly sad… I arbitrarily believed in my enemies, and they let me: I bet that tactic has never been used in any war, ever. Actually, I feel like it maybe isn’t a tactic, but I bet that’s my imagination. I’m not that dumb.”

At that point, a familiar voice rang out.

“This isn’t the time to be saying dumb stuff, Mr. Graham!”

“…I seriously respect the way you never read the mood, Shaft, to the point that it’s sad. Why do you think I’ve been going around by myself? If you saunter in here, and they’ve been tailing you and take you hostage, I’ll get stressed out about what I should say when I abandon you.”

“What, you already decided to abandon me?! N-no, seriously, this isn’t the time for that!”

As Shaft rushed in, he kept his comebacks to a minimum and described the current situation to Graham at a yell.

“Russo’s house… They’re attacking it! On top of that, this weird group in lab coats showed up, and I have no idea what all’s going on!”

Smack.

On hearing his friend’s scream, Graham stopped spinning his wrench. Then he muttered, “I screwed up,” and whacked himself lightly on the head with the hunk of iron.

“Mr. Graham?!”

“…This is what makes life fun.”

In response to Shaft’s yelp, Graham’s lips curved as if he were enjoying himself. An edge on the wrench must have cut his skin; a little blood trickled down from his head. The crimson blood dripped onto the blue coveralls, creating a dark, nearly black stain on the fabric.

With a smile that was even darker, Graham muttered as if he was truly happy.

“What makes life so fun is how you can’t predict it. Ain’t that right, Ladd?”

⟺

Beside the Russo mansion In an alley

“I—I—I just heard gunshots.”

At the sound of a storm of gunshots from inside, the Poet and Frank looked at each other, still on standby. Frank turned uneasy eyes toward the mansion, while the Poet let his gaze travel through the empty air around them.

“S-Sickle and Chi must be fighting. Do you think they’re okay?”

“Hey, Leeza. Can’t you at least tell us what’s going on in there?”

The Poet spoke to Leeza normally, most likely sensing that this was urgent. There was no response, though, and just as he was about to call her again…

…a woman’s piercing scream echoed through the alley.

“Nooo… NOOOOooooooOOOOOOOOOOoooOOOooOOooo!”

“?!” “H-huh?”

For a moment, Frank and the Poet shivered at the sudden screaming around them, but…

“Nooo… No, nooOOOooo! Father…his eye! …Fatherrrrrrr, AAAAaaaaah…”

Just as they realized that the voice was Leeza’s—

“Whyyyyy?! Aaaaaaah! Wh… ?”

The scream broke off sharply.

The echoes of the shrill wail were absorbed into the night, and after that, not a trace of Leeza’s presence remained.

Only lukewarm air drifted around them.

“What’s…happening?”

Leeza’s shriek had come out of nowhere, and then her presence had vanished.

The Poet was unable to parse the situation his group was in, and cold sweat was trickling down his spine, when…

…a short distance away, he heard a dull *whudd*.

“…?!”

When he turned to look, the kid was already gone. Apparently, that had been the sound of Frank scaling the wall and landing on the mansion’s property.

“Frank, wait!”

He raised his voice without thinking, but there was no response from the other side of the wall.

After hesitating a little, the Poet took off running toward the rear entrance, but—

—when the gate came into view, he saw two figures tearing this way.

“Chi! Sickle!”

“Run!”

Sickle’s yell was drowned out by the gunshots behind them.

However, that was enough to tell the Poet what was happening inside the walls: something serious enough to make these two take to their heels.

“Wait, Frank just went in…”

As he was about to tell them, the big door beside the rear entrance opened—and he saw a swarm of men in lab coats.

He noted that all the men in white had guns in their hands…and after about two seconds of hesitation, he ran off into the darkness with Chi and Sickle.

This is a complete digression, but…

At that moment, a mysterious phenomenon was taking place all across America.

In every corner of the country, though their lives had never crossed paths…

…certain women, who were all different ages, who lived in different areas, who had never even met…

…all screamed in exactly the same way, at exactly the same time.

Some of them were taken to hospitals because they were panicking, but no one realized the simultaneous nature of the event, and it was tidied away as a simple bout of hysteria or auditory hallucinations.

In the end, this bizarre phenomenon faded into the shadows of history without ever becoming public knowledge.



Lua's prison-room

A moment ago, things had suddenly gotten very noisy outside, and Carol was shivering violently in her hiding place under the bed.

She was clutching her camera—which had been returned to her during her imprisonment—and with every bang she suspected was a gunshot, she gave a little scream.

It's a chance for a scoop! It's a scoop, but still!

In her mind's eye, she could see herself rushing gallantly to the scene and snapping photographs. However, her full-body shivers thoroughly shattered that fantasy.

As she quaked with her own wretchedness and her terror of the gunshots…

"It's all right."

…a gentle voice embraced Carol.

"Nghhh… Miss Lua…"

As Carol took a few deep breaths and looked up, a new noise came to startle her—the sound of someone banging on the door. The girl's hands naturally tightened on her camera.

"M-M-M-Mi-Mi-Miss Lua, I-I-I-I-I'll pop the flash and blind them, so you t-t-t-t-take that chance and…"

Unable even to speak clearly, Carol loudly fumbled her way through an abrupt show of bravery, but just as she stood up, the door opened— And when she saw the face behind it, Carol had no qualms about wailing this time.

"Vuh! …V-V-V-V-V-Vice PresideeEEeeeeEEEEEEnt!"

"Hmm. Carol. What did I tell you just the other day?"

Giving her a troubled look from behind his monocle, the vice president patted the sobbing girl's head and lectured her.

"You mustn't look at people and then shriek at them."

⟺

A corridor of the Russo mansion

“By the way, Chris…”

“What, Rail? Looks like something’s on your mind.”

As they hurried down a long corridor at a trot, Rail morosely spoke to Christopher, who was ahead of him. Ricardo was bringing up the rear, but there was a little distance between them; they were making sure it was safe before they advanced.

With his backpack on now that they’d left the room, Rail lowered his voice so Ricardo wouldn’t overhear and said…

“A minute ago, when I saw Ricardo changing, I noticed something.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Ricardo’s, uh…”

Despite the tension, Christopher bit back a smile as he nodded. He’d probably predicted what Rail was going to say.

Rail narrowed his eyes at this, but he still asked his question, straight-out.

“…a *girl*?”

He seemed extremely hesitant to say the word, and Christopher swallowed his smile entirely, responding with a perfectly calm expression.

“Yes. What about it?”

“…You knew?”

“Well, I mean, we’ve lived together for more than a year.”

Flashing his fangs in a grin, the red-eyed young man seemed to be enjoying his reply.

“That said, Ricardo didn’t say anything and I didn’t ask, so it was more of a tacit understanding. I’d say the only people in the syndicate

who know are the boss, a few old-timer executives, and the housekeeper.”

“…”

They were approaching a staircase, and the gunshots had gotten closer, so they were walking carefully. Even then, Christopher kept talking.

“Does that private bathroom make sense to you now?”

“More than I’d like,” Rail agreed briefly.

The joy in Christopher’s expression grew deeper and deeper, and he cackled like a mischievous little kid.

“Originally, I wanted to have you walk in on Ricardo during a shower, to see if the kid would scream. She changed clothes right in front of us without a blush, though, so I doubt she would have.”

“Chris…? Mind if I blow you away?”

Rail smiled, an angry vein bulging, and took an egg with an attached pin out of his breast pocket.

While Christopher watched him with amusement, he listened closely to the noises in the mansion—and noticed that there was a lull in the gunshots.

Then he took off running toward what seemed to be the heart of the uproar: Placido’s room.

“I think you might want to hang on to that bomb for a bit!”

⟺

Placido’s room

The door to the living quarters—not the entrance, nor the door that Chi and Sickle had used—was kicked open, and a red-eyed monster and a boy with scars like train tracks burst in.

Chi and Sickle already seemed to have made their getaway. The moment they entered, the monster and the boy made eye contact with the bespectacled woman in a lab coat, who was eyeing them curiously.

“Oh! Rail! I thought you’d run off. You’ve been here?”

“Huh…?”

The woman in the lab coat sounded pleasant enough—but Rail had frozen up completely.

Aha, so this is the group in lab coats that Ricardo was talking about? Christopher thought, but then he noticed Rail had begun quivering violently next to him.

“What’s the matter, Rail?” he asked, puzzled.

“Wh…why…?!”

Though his lips were pulled into a tense smile, his eyes were astounded, hateful, and terrified.

“They’re… Back then… Back then, I know I… I blew them *to bits*!”

“Huh?”

That was when Christopher suddenly realized something: The group that had tried to snatch Rail when he was alone had also been wearing lab coats. Back then, Rail had made his escape by throwing a ton of explosives willy-nilly, prepared to take himself out along with them. This had resulted in his rescue by Christopher and Ricardo, but…

When Christopher saw Rail’s expression, he was sure the boy really had blown them to bits.

At the same moment, he was convinced that these people in white were not normal.

Meanwhile, a memory from a few days earlier surfaced in Rail's mind (although, since he'd woken up just a few hours before, it was a very recent memory for him).

This woman. Her appearance and manner of speech were completely different… Yet, for some reason, he had seen Huey superimposed on her figure, and before he knew it, he was throwing bomb after bomb.

He'd wrapped himself in his fireproof coat, and in the instant the blast flung him away, he'd seen something quite clearly.

The group in white was ripped to pieces, and the white-clad woman's neck was broken.

And yet… Right now, here she was, alive and well.

"She's…immortal?"

His whole body was shivering slightly, and his teeth were chattering audibly, but even then, he forced the word *immortal* out of his lungs.

The solemn answer reached Rail's ears. "The incomplete kind…but yes."

The response had come not from the group in white, but from Placido, who was crouched at a table by the window.

His clothes were peppered with holes—from bullets, by all appearances—but there wasn't a scratch on him.

"However… Kid. If we put that and you together…we'd have a perfect liquor of immortality, right?"

Placido's smile was filled with greed, and the individuals in white smirked at one another.

Christopher didn't think they were just a group of researchers who happened to be immortal. The only one acting thoroughly blithe was Renee, and while the remaining members did crack jokes, they constantly kept a wary eye on their surroundings.

It didn't look as if there would be much teamwork here, but each one seemed to have endured training that would, at the very least, have enabled them to hold their ground in a war zone.

Christopher seemed delighted as he addressed Renee, who was surrounded by those immortal soldiers.

"I see! It all makes sense now… So those twelve hundred failed guinea pigs in New York were your stock farm, and you used it to pick out your guard dogs?"

Last year, in Nebula's branch headquarters in New York, Christopher had seen twelve hundred "failed" immortals.

Recalling his own personal involvement in the event, he had brought it up with the intent to buy time.

However, Renee only tilted her head in utter bewilderment.

"Huh? No, that isn't it."

"Really?"

"Well, I mean… Guinea pigs are rodents. *You can't pick guard dogs out of a bunch of rats, could you?!* I wouldn't do anything that inefficient."

"…"

Renee's answer left Rail speechless as he listened to the conversation from Christopher's side. When he saw her puff out her chest with a proud little chuckle, a terrible chill ran down his back.

She's… That wasn't sarcasm or anything…

That's what she really and truly thinks!

She wasn't playing the fool, even if it had sounded that way. She had been perfectly genuine.

Christopher didn't want to admit he'd been outplayed, so he shrugged and retorted, "What, didn't you know? In India, they train rats and turn them into guard rats. They're stronger than elephants."

"Huh?! R-really?!"

Renee was completely taken in, but she was subjected to a flood of comebacks as she looked around at the others: "Of course not." "Please have a little common sense, Director." "Go to hell, Director." "Raise our salaries, Director." "Strip, Director."

Ignoring the white-clad individuals and their lack of anxiety, one lone person—Placido—struck the table with his fist and flung intimidating words at Christopher.

"Christopher, what are you doing? Hurry up and grab the kid next to you!"

Apparently, he didn't understand why Rail was there with him.

Christopher felt a little sorry for the old guy, but… With a wry smile, he decided to add a little spice to the man's life. After all, like himself, Placido was no longer human.

"Unfortunately… That isn't what my employer wants."

"What…?"

The next moment—

Shing. The sound of metal against metal reached the ears of everyone in the room.

The emotion in Rail's soft voice had been almost completely stifled.

“I’m gonna blow you away.”

And with that icy murmur—several eggs scattered into the air.

⇔

A sudden roar echoed through the mansion, and the hallway rocked as if there had been an earthquake.

“Aaaaaaaaaah! Vice President! Wh-wh-what was that?!”

“Calm yourself.”

“I can’t!”

“Then do so not for your own benefit. Still the confusion in your heart for the sake of someone else,” the vice president muttered to her as they ran down the hall, and Carol looked back in spite of herself.

Lua was following them after Carol had dragged her out of the room by force.

She must have been uneasy after all. She’d even asked Carol if she would get in their way.

“Um… May I escape with you?”

The moment she saw Lua’s face, Carol felt a burst of courage, and she threw out her chest as she answered, “Please don’t worry! We may not look like it, but we’re information brokers. We’ll find a safe place for you until your special someone is released!”

As Carol firmly pulled Lua along by the hand, the vice president spoke quietly.

“I won’t say that volunteer work is wrong. However, unless it is commensurate with what you can afford to give, the results will be unfortunate for both of you. If you’ll remember that, then I shall cooperate with you this time.”

“It’s all right! I’m always cool and calm if you’re here, Vice President!”

“…That audacity is rather well suited to our establishment.”

⇔

The garden Near the front entrance

“She’s not here.”

“What should we do? You think she ran off after that explosion?”

Christopher and Rail had launched themselves away from the blast, rolling into the entrance.

They’d looked for Ricardo with the intent to get out of there right away, but Ricardo was nowhere to be seen.

They’d gone out into the garden, figuring the kid might have run outside ahead of them, but found no one.

“I don’t think she got hit by the explosion, but…” Rail muttered uneasily.

“Guess I’ll have to try looking again.”

Christopher headed back into the peril of the mansion, but he didn’t seem especially pessimistic.

Rail didn’t try to stop him.

Ricardo chose to run because I was there.

On that thought, Rail started back toward the mansion’s entrance, but just then, a familiar voice called to him from behind.

“Interesting… Let me tell you an interesting story.”

He froze.

Rail had grown so used to the physiological reaction that he started wondering how many times it had been just this week.

“What the heck is going on here?”

Rail turned around. The person he’d expected to see was standing there.

“So you blew up my boss’s house, huh? You’re really, uh…*asking for it*.”

I see… So this guy has ties to this place, too.

As he watched the shadow of the spinning wrench, Rail’s blood gradually drained. Even he could tell that his color was growing worse. Should he use a smoke screen to get out of this?

However, if he went back in to look for Ricardo afterward instead of running away, would he be able to get out again safely?

Dammit… Looking at this guy makes me see how little I can do!

He had the urge to challenge the guy in front of him, but another part of him was screaming at himself to run for it, fast.

That hesitation would create a lingering vulnerability, and he’d probably lose again.

Rail had seen his own future, a handful of seconds ahead, and it made him miserable about everything. He began to tear up, but—

“Hey, you! What the hell are you doing there?!”

That was when some newcomers arrived.

It was a group of three gangsters, led by a man with a scar on his cheek. Rail had never seen any of them before.

“Oho… So this is the brat? Not bad, for a sea slug. When the mansion blew up, I wondered what the hell was going on. That was you, huh?”

Krieck sneered at the scar-faced boy as he spoke, but abruptly, someone tapped him on the shoulder.

When he turned around, there was a beaming Graham.

“Hunh? Whaddaya want, sea slug bastar—”

“You’re in the way.”

Krieck disappeared into the garden shrubbery headfirst, along with the rest of his sentence.

The wrench had whistled right into Krieck’s head, knocking it away and his body with it.

“G-Graham! You sonuva—”

A thrill of tension ran between the two remaining gangsters, until a clear voice from behind cut through the strain.

“You really are.”

Just as they heard the voice, the two men began to flip, sketching beautiful arcs in the air.

The men’s heads were flung to the left and right with considerable momentum. Their skulls were rotating in opposite directions, and in the next instant, they slammed right into each other just above the ground.

The force was less like a clacker toy and more like two flints being struck. The men’s brains rattled, and they dropped very unsafely to the stone pavement.

Then, without sparing them another man, the red-eyed man faced Graham, and—

—bowed respectfully to the enemy that frightened Rail.

“Good evening,” he said. Just that.

For his part, Graham whistled at the other man’s deft skill in taking out two opponents in the same instant. As he retraced his memories, he began to talk terms with his opponent.



“Hey. You’re Master Ricardo’s bodyguard. I’m a little confused about all this, but… If you’re standing there, it means you’re protecting that kid from me. Is that right?”

“Well, that’s about the size of it. Rail was telling me that you took real good care of my friends Chi, Sickle, and Frank, too.”

“In other words, we’re gonna fight?” Unusually, Graham was keeping his tone under control.

“Wow. That’s quite a leap. Not that I mind.”

Seeming unsure, Christopher murmured, “What should I do…? Should I kill you or run? I can tell you’re tough, that much is obvious, but frankly, at the moment, I don’t know if I’m tough or not.”

It was an odd thing to say, and Christopher had no qualms about exposing his own disgrace.

“After all, a year ago, I got in a fight to the death and lost spectacularly. Not only that, but the guy wasn’t even giving it his all. He was pitying me. Since then, to be honest—I’ve been too scared to handle mortal combat. So just to get my instincts back…I do think maybe I should do a little killing.”

“Then as far as you’re concerned, I’m…”

Remembering the resounding defeat he’d suffered in New York, Christopher finished Graham’s sentence for him with a self-mocking smile.

“…Rehab. ☺”

“Interesting. You’re interesting… Ha! Fascinating! See, I was just feeling bored, too! Breaking people isn’t my thing, but…*when I could finally manage to break somebody after giving it everything I’ve got*, then that’s different.”

With a light *smack, smack*, the rotating wrench sped up as Graham's high energy began to condense.

For his part, whether his opponent was an immortal or some being that surpassed even them, Christopher wasn't at all nervous even as he acknowledged his strength.

The miscreants closed in on each other, forming a strange reality that existed only between the two of them.

It was eerie and gloomy, composed of nothing but bloodlust and the desire to destroy, but…

At the very least, the two inside seemed to be enjoying it.

And yet… Why can't I move?

As the worlds of the two deviants collided, off to the side, the boy lowered his eyes sadly.

Where *is it…that I want to go?*

He felt as if he'd been left out of everything happening around him, and his mind and body could do nothing but waver there.

Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth…

⟺

In Placido's room

"Dammit!"

The explosion had completely trashed the room's interior. Placido slammed his fist into the miraculously unscathed table.

Only he and Renee were in the room. Most of the remaining white-coats had gone to the rear entrance in pursuit of Chi and Sickle, who'd fled out the window a moment ago.

Renee gave a small, startled cry of recognition as the situation unfolded.

“Oh!”

“Wh-what’s wrong, ma’am?” he asked politely, following Renee’s gaze.

When he did, he saw the two information brokers escaping with the girl he’d meant to use as a trump card against Ladd.

“Th-those two… They ran off! And they took Lua!”

As he watched his trump card slipping away, Placido felt something dark and heavy bear down on his spine.

Even though Placido was immortal now, Ladd’s malice weighed on his heart like a curse. As if to drive off the chill, the don railed angrily against what he was seeing.

“Damn that broker! So he stabbed me in the back, huh?! Was he the one who leaked the info on this place?!”

Unlike Placido, Renee was watching the receding information brokers through the window with a cheery smile.

“Oh, I wondered what Mr. Gustav was doing here. Does this mean you captured him, Mr. Placido? It’s a shame he got away,” commented the woman in the lab coat.

Placido said, “You… You know that monocled gink?!”

“Hmm? Yes, of course! Don’t you? Even among the mafia, he’s terribly, terribly famous.”

“Nuh, no… I dunno him.”

Placido shook his head uncomfortably, sensing that he’d been informed that his information-gathering abilities as a mafioso were

lacking. Oblivious to this, Renee puffed out her chest proudly and began to tell him about Gustav.

“Mr. Gustav is the vice president of one of the most distinguished information brokerages in the whole country! If you give him money or information for it, he’ll sell you almost any knowledge there is; he’s an incredibly capable broker.”

“Wh-what…?”

“There are no mistakes, and sometimes it even helps the police find the culprits in cold cases!” she crowed, as proudly as if his achievements were hers.

Placido hastily began rifling through the contents of his desktop.

In a corner of the cluttered desk, he found a scrap of paper. As he reread the information from Gustav on that paper, his eyes gleamed with a feral kind of pleasure.

“I—I see… So all this stuff is accurate, huh?! Heh-heh… Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Interesting. First I’ll slaughter these Isaac and Miria jokers, and then I’ll strangle the tattooed kid and the rest of ’em with my own hands!”

“Um, erm, uh…”

As Placido shouted theatrically, Renee timidly raised her right hand in apology and broke into his monologue.

“I’m sorry. You can’t do that.”

“What…? What do you mean?”

“Excuse me. Let me see your forehead for a minute, please.”

“…?”

Had some side effect of the failed liquor developed? Immediately uneasy, Placido hastily exposed his forehead to Renee.

“Wh-what, is there some kind of bruise or something?”

“No. Immortals can’t get bruises, not even incomplete ones.”

“? Then what’s—?”

Renee’s blasé voice, and the touch of her hand on his forehead, cut off Placido’s dubious question…

…forever.

“Thank you for the meal.”

Those were the last words that the temporarily immortal Placido Russo ever heard.

⟺

Huh?

Frank had been peeking in through the window, and at first, he couldn’t believe the sight he was suddenly faced with.

Wh-what in the world was that?

The woman in the lab coat had set her hand on the elderly man’s head, and then—

In the next instant, the man’s body began disappearing into her palm.

Like water rapidly draining from a bathtub, his human body undulated wildly. And like jelly being sucked through a straw, it was absorbed into the woman’s slender frame. If you’d expressed it with a noise, the sound effect *shloop* would probably have fit perfectly.

From what Frank had seen, at least, the only way to put it was that the woman's right hand had eaten someone. He was used to outlandish sights, and he was aware that he himself qualified as such, but even to him, it was shocking.

I—I have to tell everybody…

Frank's huge body shrank in on itself… But his ears picked up a voice from somewhere below him.

"Don't move."

Just as Frank heard the command, a violent *bang* came outside the window. The vibration traveled into his eardrums and his brain, and a powerful punch landed on his thigh.

"O-ow…?"

However, a punch was just Frank's mistaken interpretation.

When he looked down at his feet, red flowers had bloomed on both sides of his thigh. Numbness spread from the crimson bursts to the rest of his leg all in a rush. After the dull ache…incredible agony ran through Frank.

"Waah… Waaah-ah-ah-aaaahh-aaaaaaaaaaaah!"

He gave a scream that sounded a bit sluggish. Then, around him, he heard several extremely laid-back male voices.

"Wow, that's really something. Not only did it not go through, it might not even have reached the bone."

"I shot as I told him not to move. That's okay, right?"

"No problem. It's not like we're soldiers; those rules might as well not exist."

The sound of the window opening joined their conversation, and a woman's frightened voice rang out.

“H-hello? What is it…? Oh! That big child— He’s, um… Frank, wasn’t it?”

“That’s right, Director. The other ones, the guy in the hat and the doll with the kicks—they ran off. We couldn’t catch up, and when we came back here, this huge kid was peeking in through the window.”

“Huh?! Did he… Did he see what just happened?!”

Renee blanched, and the men in lab coats replied calmly.

“He saw you real good, Director.”

“That’s why we keep telling you to pay attention to your surroundings.”

“Learn a little, all right?”

“Read the mood, too, all right?”

As they berated her, Renee turned her attention to Frank’s enormous frame, as if trying to distract them.

“Still, he really is big, isn’t he? We’ll have to use the truck’s whole bed!”

As she gave Frank a carefree once-over, Renee clapped her hands together lightly and smiled, issuing instructions to the men in lab coats.

“Oh, if the tranquilizer wears off while we’re in transit and he starts to fight, the driver might get into an accident, you know? So let’s give him another three or four shots, and then— Cut all the tendons in his arms and legs. Just in case, please!”

The men in white had no questions whatsoever about that cruel order…

…and several of them surrounded Frank's huge body, preparing to do as they'd been told.

When he saw the blades pointed at him—a memory rose in Frank's mind.

Researchers in Huey's research facility, wearing the same white lab coats, holding scalpels, closing in on him and Rail.

He also remembered the pain and the terror that had accompanied them—

—and the next thing Frank knew, he was screaming the name of the boy who'd endured it with him.

"R-Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaail!"

⇔

"…Frank?"

The cry echoing through the mansion sent an electric shock through Rail.

It was the scream of someone who'd been his friend for as long as he could remember, whose life had been damaged by Huey and the researchers along with his own. His body was immediately drenched in cold sweat.

Before he knew it, he'd already started running toward the scream, and he distracted Christopher during his face-off against Graham.

"Oh— Hey, Rail!"

Christopher tried to stop him, but Rail didn't listen. He dashed off, toward the back of the mansion.

Graham didn’t let the opening escape him and thrust the end of the wrench at one of Christopher’s joints—but Christopher noticed at the last moment and jumped away to put extra distance between them.

“Time-out for a second. Listen, I don’t have any weapons on me today. I lost my knife-guns last year.”

“At the moment, I’d love to shout back ‘Not my problem,’ but let’s hear what you’ve got to say. What do I have to gain by letting you go?”

“Next time you’ve lost your wrench, I won’t mess with you. Would you call that a win and let me go now?”

“…You say some interesting stuff.”

Graham spun his wrench, narrowing his eyes as if he was entertained.

“And since it is so interesting, you oughta play with me a bit more, a’ight?”

“…Guess I’ve got no choice, then. This is more trouble than it’s worth, so… I’m going to kill you for real, okay?”

Christopher smiled cheerfully, gritting his rows of fangs, and in the next moment—

The headlights of a car swept over the two, and they heard the sound of an incoming engine.

When they reflexively turned to look, they saw a passenger car bearing down on them at a terrific speed.

“?!”

They both jumped back at the same time as the car came between them to forcibly separate them.

Deciding it must be somebody from the wanted poster, Graham was about to hurl his wrench at the driver, but—

"Young master Ricardo…?"

Realizing that the figure in the driver's seat was the Russo grandkid, he retracted his wrench hand.

"Ricardo."

"Get in!" Ricardo shouted firmly, and Christopher obediently jumped into the passenger seat.

The next moment, the car sprang into motion, pressing him hard against the seat.

The driving was rough, but Christopher calmly pointed out the more fundamental issue.

"…You can drive?"

"I can work the gas and the brakes, at least!"

The reply was unusually animated. When Christopher turned to look, he saw the kid was half-standing, jamming a foot down onto the accelerator. If Ricardo leaned back in the seat, the pedals would probably be out of reach.

Smiling dryly at the sight, Christopher spoke as a hint of cold sweat began to form.

"…I'll switch with you. Stop for a second, okay?"

⟺

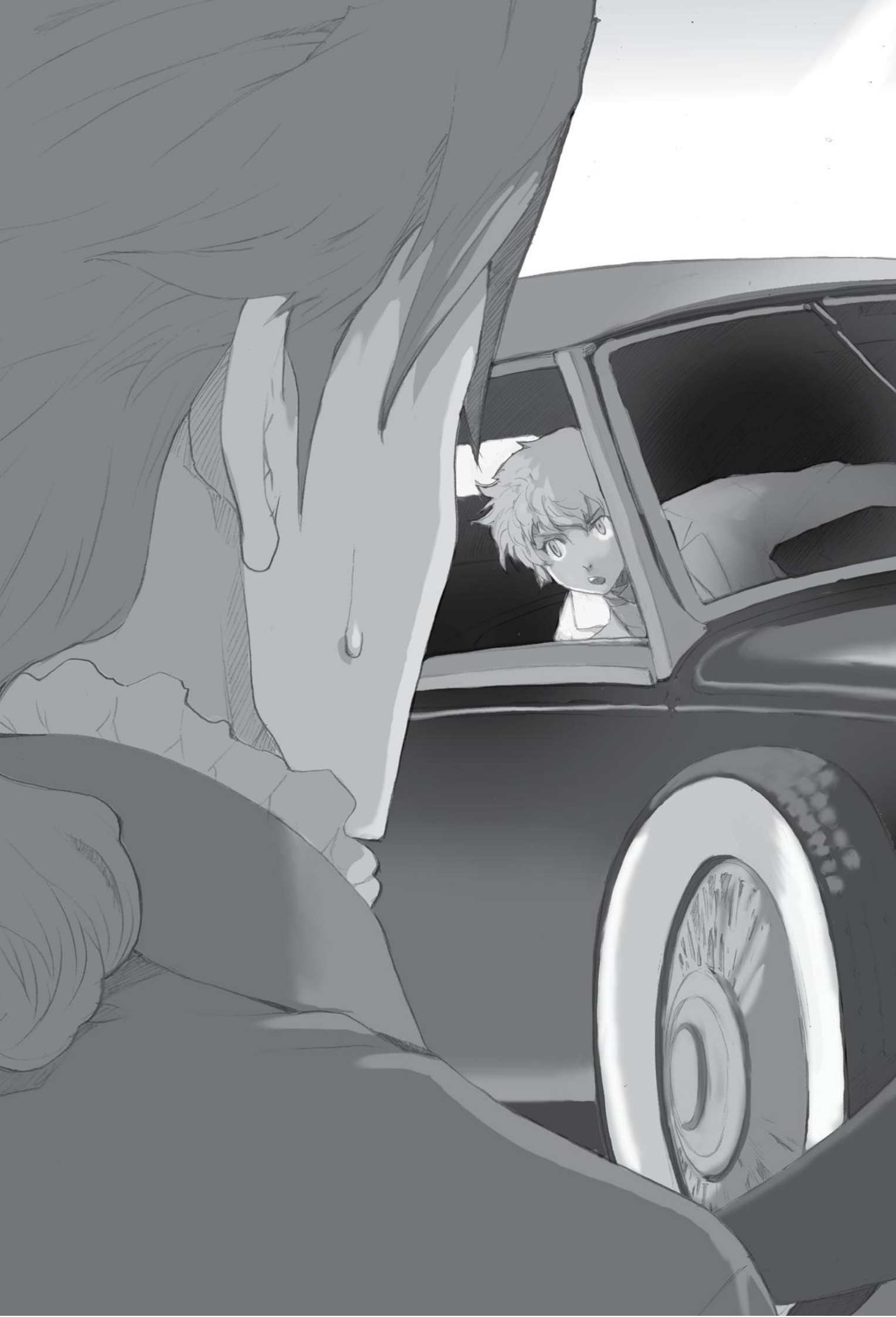
The backyard

"Frank…?"

Rail had run off toward the scream, and there he found—

—the body of his giant childhood friend, stained red with blood.

His hands and feet were bloodied, and he seemed almost lifeless. A crowd of men in lab coats was loading him into the bed of the truck they'd arrived in.



“Fraaaaank!”

At the boy’s scream, the men in white all turned around at once.

Rail thought he saw Frank look in his direction, but it was just his imagination. Frank’s mind had gone completely dark already.

“Frank… Let him go…!”

Rail took an egg-shaped bomb out of his jacket, preparing to throw it at the men who were far enough away from Frank that the blast wouldn’t hurt him.

He saw the men draw their guns, but Rail didn’t seem to care as he set his fingers on the pin—

And then he froze.

The military guns the men had taken from their lab coats…were all trained on Frank.

“…!”

Rail shuddered, then went still.

“Oh? You’re… You actually came back to us?”

The happy-go-lucky question seemed completely oblivious to the mood. When he looked toward the source, a bespectacled woman poked her head out from the shadows of the truck where Frank was being loaded.

“You…!”

“Did you come to save your friend?”

Though she looked mildly startled, the bespectacled woman sounded perfectly at ease.

“That’s a little unexpected. To think that Mr. Huey could raise *a guinea pig who cares about his friends*…”

“…!”

“Oh, were you created so he could research human emotions or something like that? Or did he convert someone who was originally a normal human?”

The question was too much, and for a moment, Rail was speechless.

Renee gazed at the silent Rail curiously, but the white-clad men around her rolled their eyes and began giving their boss candid advice.

“Director Renee. There’s no point in asking the test subject about the intent of an experiment.”

“Look at that little smirk. He’s laughing at you, Director.”

However, the interpretation missed the mark. For Rail, the men’s thoughts bled into his past memories at the research facility, and he felt a faint despair. His hand trembled around the bomb.

As for the bespectacled woman they called Renee, still oblivious to the mood, her face fell when she heard the men’s accusations. But then…

As if attempting to recover, she struck both hands together lightly, then pointed at Rail.

“Um, ummmm. Anyway, perfect timing! If we take him along, too, we’ll double our results! Besides, unlike the Poet and Sickle, it sounds like Huey gave instructions to tinker with their bodies in some very special ways!”

That childlike perspective made the men in lab coats smile amiably—

—and in the next instant, they coldly turned on Rail.

“Roger that, Director.”

Break time was over, and they were back on the job. The men were already seeing Rail as a guinea pig.

“Ungh…!”

All kinds of memories turned into flashbacks, assaulting Rail’s heart, and he almost fumbled the bomb he was holding.

As he watched the men come closer, step by step, guns at the ready—a hopeless nausea welled up from his gut. His knees began to quake.

He couldn’t just stand here.

He wanted to blow all these people away.

He wanted to run.

But he had to save Frank…

These contradictory impulses intersected, and in the end, he couldn’t act on any of them.

Was this it, then?

Rail was about to scream, and in that moment—

—instead of a scream came the roar of an engine, and a car burst into the backyard.

“Hey, Ricardo, it’s about to get a little bumpy. Be careful.”

As he spoke, Christopher abruptly stood up in the driver’s seat.

“…Huh?”

Beside him, Ricardo gave a yelp of surprise. Still standing on the accelerator, Christopher skillfully flung the door open and wrenched the steering wheel to the side. The car skidded sideways, its open door slipped neatly in front of Rail—and he scooped the boy up with his left hand and yanked him into the car.

When he saw that Rail was gripping a bomb, Christopher passed his slight frame to Ricardo in the passenger seat and tore the egg-shaped object out of his small hands.

Then he stomped on the gas and sent the car barreling forward, away from the white-clad group at top speed.

The group in lab coats turned their guns on the car and started forward, intending to fire at it, but—

They hastily jumped back when they noticed an egg tumbling out of the retreating vehicle.

Just as they all hit the dirt, the explosion roared out.

“Yeeeeeeek?!”

The bespectacled woman hadn’t taken cover quickly enough, and although the flames didn’t reach her, the blast wind knocked her over backward.

Rail didn’t even see it. The car had already made its escape through the rear gate, but he looked back from inside and screamed.

“Frank… Fraaaank!”

“It’s better if we rescue him later. If we start a fight now, Frank’s bound to get hit by a stray bullet or something else. He’ll die!”

Unusually for him, Christopher’s words were forceful. Rail’s mouth worked as if he wanted to say something— But before long, just as the mansion disappeared from view, he closed his mouth, hanging his head. After that, only an uncomfortable silence filled the car.

“They got away…”

Renee climbed to her feet, coughing lightly, then tried to encourage both her white-clad subordinates and herself with false cheer.

“It’s all right, though! I’m sure they’ll come to save this large boy…um…Frank, and when they do, we can just catch them all at once! As a matter of fact, that was the plan all along!”

“Uh… Why would you lie now?”

Her subordinates glowered at her, but Renee stuck to her guns, insisting that this was her strategy—

—and while her attitude seemed out of place, what she said was not, in a way.

“So you see, even if the test subject dies, you mustn’t tell anybody!”

“…He is going to die, then?”

“Mm… It’s fifty-fifty. Still, do your very best to keep him alive, please.”

Renee’s smile was soft, and her words were firm.

Firm, and cruel.

“After all, we’ll have more ways to experiment if he’s alive!”

⟺

Outside the front gate

“…Is this…a sad story? Or is it a fun one?”

“Mr. Graham! This place is bad news! Let’s get out of here, right now!”

Gunshots and explosions were reverberating from the Russo mansion.

Graham had been standing in front of the gate, but Shaft grabbed his hand to drag him away.

“I’m still confused, but that bunch of doctor-types doesn’t seem interested in us, so let’s go!”

As if to say that this was their chance, Shaft tried to make his escape with Graham—but Graham didn’t even register the group in lab coats anymore.

“That red-eyed bastard… He’s interesting. Truly interesting. It really gets me, right here.”

Remembering what he’d felt during their momentary clash a little while ago, Graham turned his back on the mansion and began spinning his huge wrench in delight.

“It looks like I’ll be able to tell sad, fun stories until my brother Ladd gets out of the slammer. Right?”

Cracking his neck audibly, he spun the wrench faster and faster.

“Enough of ’em to keep from getting bored, at least.”

On and on and on.

Twirl, twirl, twirl, twirl…

Spiraling, spiraling, spiraling, spiraling into insanity—

⇔

Somewhere in Chicago

When they were a good long way from the Russo mansion, Christopher took the car into a lakeside park.

He was just thinking that they could probably stop worrying about pursuers at this point when Rail, slumped in the back seat, murmured in a barely audible voice.

“…I’m sorry… Let me off…here.”

“Huh?!”

“I’m not going with you… I’m grateful to you for saving me. Thanks… So let me off.”

At Rail’s sudden request, Ricardo glanced at Christopher with concern.

Christopher thought it over for a few moments, but…

…he went on until the road widened a little, then stopped the car without a word.

“…Thanks.”

Rail opened the door on his own and got out of the car, then began walking deeper into the park, toward a forest. He didn’t get far before he slowly crumpled to his knees, as if his strength was gone.

“…Ngh…”

The boy knelt in the dirt of the park, breathing raggedly. Christopher got out of the car, too, and spoke to him from behind.

“You okay, Rail?”

Instead of answering, Rail asked Christopher a question of his own.

“What’s…gonna happen to Frank?”

The boy’s eyes were pleading, but Christopher didn’t sugarcoat anything.

“Hmm… I think they’ve probably taken him to Nebula’s headquarters, or to a factory somewhere in Elleson Hill. In my opinion, they seemed a lot like the people at Huey’s research facility. They’ll probably treat him the same way, or…*if he’s lucky, they’ll kill him quickly*. That’s the impression I got.”

“…That’s what I was thinking, too.”

As Rail remembered the woman and the group in lab coats, he was recalling his own past.

“That woman… She may not talk the same way, but…she’s just like Huey. She… She really just looks at us like we’re under a microscope. Seeing her reminds me of…what happened, way back then… When they turned me into this…!”

Rail’s shoulders were trembling. There was an unnatural smile on his lips, but his eyes were filled with tears of frustration and terror.

“What are they…? What *are* they…? Those immortals… Chris—Chris, tell me… What are those people—those immortals anyway…? First Huey, and now that woman… What the hell are they?! And what about us…? What are we…?”

He tried to sound angry to disguise his own fear, but the fear won, and his voice was shaking before he was finished.

“If we aren’t human, if we’re unnatural creatures…then what—what are they? …What are they?! They used to be regular humans, unlike us, but now… Now they’re way, way more unnatural than we are, and they’re crazy! Waah… Aaaah… AaaaaaaAAAaaaaaaaah…”

Finally unable to hold back any longer, Rail’s face twisted, and he wailed.

“AAAAAAaah… AaaaaaAAAaaaah! AAAAaaaaaAaaAAaaaaah!”

He cried and cried…

“AaAAAAaaaaah… AAAAAaaaaaaAAah! …Aaah! …Ha… Ha-ha…”

And eventually, the tears turned into a laugh like a broken instrument.

“Ha-ha…ha-ha-ha… Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Rail…”

Rail’s eyes were glittering brightly, and Christopher gazed down at him sorrowfully from where he stood next to him.

Ricardo was waiting in the car, but Christopher didn’t pull Rail to his feet and take him away. He only turned his red eyes to the night sky, irritatingly full of stars, and listened quietly to Rail’s shouts.

“Hey… C’mon, this is weird. How come…I can laugh like this when I’m so sad? Say, Chris, don’t you think it’s funny? Aren’t you gonna laugh? C’mon, tell me! Ha-ha! …Ha-ha-ha… Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“I laughed like that once, too, a long time ago. I forget what it was that set me off.”

“Ha-ha-ha…ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Hee… Hee…! Hee…ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Maybe Rail had laughed too much; the suture scars on his face creaked, and blood was seeping out in places.

He didn’t care, though, and he kept right on going. He just laughed and laughed, with tears streaming down his face.

“It’s weird, but when you’re really in trouble, you start wanting to laugh. I wonder if ordinary humans are like that, too.”

Christopher paid no particular attention to the blood, either. He just kept talking, though Rail may or may not have heard him.

“But…that was the trigger, and afterward, I think I did go crazy, in the real sense of the word.”

“Ha-ha-ha… Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“So listen, Rail. I won’t stop you. I won’t. I can’t.”

“Ha-ha…ha-ha…ha…ha-ha-ha-ha…ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha…”

“I’m not sure how to put it… I’m already broken, so I can’t put you back together. If you’re going to break like we have, I can give you as much of a hand as you like. But you know, right now, I think you’re at a crossroads… I think you need to make this decision on your own.”

“Ha-ha…ha…ha-ha…”

“I just hope…somebody who’s still whole can pull you back from the edge.”

He ended the speech with an honest expression of his feelings and started back toward the car, where Ricardo was waiting.

“You see, if that happens, I’m sure *you’ll be able to live as a human*, Rail.”

“Ha-ha…huh…? Ha-ha-ha…”

“I idolize them, so I guess I may be a little jealous of you, Rail. Ha-ha.”

“…”

“I’m planning to do something, too, but… Well, I’m still technically Ricardo’s bodyguard, so I guess it’s up to her… If you want to come along, I won’t stop you. Right now, though, I don’t think I can make you.”

Slowly, Christopher walked away. Rail watched him go, unable to follow. His attitude had seemed cold, but Rail couldn’t curse him, nor could tears make him stay, either.

Gradually, his laughter ran dry in the night air.

Then, when he heard the car's engine, and he was sure he couldn't see Christopher anymore—

"A human? Did you say 'as a human'…?"



Rail burst into tears one final time, and his scream echoed through the night.

“That joke’s not funny. I can’t laugh at that, Chris… Christopherrrrr!”

How much time had passed?

Rail’s laughter had eventually stopped. He’d fallen to his knees like a broken doll, but…

…slowly getting to his feet, he muttered to himself, “You’re going to help me out. Sham… Hilton…”

As usual, his lips were drawn up into a smile by the sutures, but the look in his eyes was nothing like what it was before.

“Frank…if you’re alive…I promise I’ll come and save you.”

His eyes were fixed on some faraway point, but his words were focused steadily forward.

“We’ll blow up every last one of that group in lab coats…”

And all that lay before him was indelible darkness.

“And then we’ll take that bastard Huey, and the ones who cut into my body and your skull at the lab…and we’ll blow them all away, too.”

Rail was aware of this, but it actually gave him a pleasant feeling, and his monologue continued into the chilly winter air.

His voice was very faint. However, the will in those words was strong.

“And then…let’s blow up all the people who didn’t accept us…and create a legend. We’ll blow up the town…spread the story around other towns ourselves…and then we’ll blow up those towns, too.

“We’ll blow up all our nightmares. Every last one.”

⟺

At noon that day—it happened.

Wild gouts of flame burst up in locations throughout Elleson Hill, and the roar was heard all the way in Chicago. The location of the first explosion wasn't identified until a very long time afterward, and it was determined that some sort of timer had probably been used to trigger the explosions simultaneously.

All the damage was to facilities that had connections to Nebula. It was considered a clear act of terrorism against the Nebula Corporation, and a peculiar tension ran not only through the town of Elleson Hill, but through the neighborhood around the company headquarters in Chicago.

The anxiety that gripped the town was unprecedented, and smoke and flames were still rising in Elleson Hill.

To the citizens, this bombing had come out of nowhere…

…and it seemed to be not an incident in its own right but the harbinger of one to come.

On the outskirts of Chicago…

In a corner of a run-down tavern, the Poet had been listening to the news about it on the radio and spoke quietly to Sickle beside him.

"…Do you think it was Rail?"

"Wow, that's new. How many years has it been since I heard you speak properly?"

Sickle responded sarcastically, her expression as sullen as ever, but she did answer the question.

"It's gotta be Rail. Can you think of anyone else?"

“Was it an attempt to save Frank? If so, it was careless. Besides…it wouldn’t have been possible for him to set three hundred bombs by himself, not in such a short time. Sham or Hilton probably helped.”

Sickle’s scowl deepened as the Poet calmly summarized the situation, and she brought up another problem that was affecting their immediate vicinity.

“Sham, Hilton, and even Leeza have vanished. What does it mean?”

“I expect it’s just in Chicago… Or so I’d like to think.”

In an attempt to break out of their current predicament, Chi had left Chicago early that morning to meet with Tim and Adele in New York.

They’d settled on this nearly deserted bar as the place they would make contact to plan for their reunion, but neither the Poet nor Sickle had any idea whether the situation would develop further in the meantime.

After the bombings, the radio touched on the mass concurrent disappearances.

“What do you think of these disappearances?” the Poet asked.

From Sickle’s answer, she felt he shouldn’t even need to ask.

“I’ve got no proof, but I bet they’re Sham and Hilton.”

“They seem to assume the bomber and the kidnapper are the same person. To think that it’s actually opposing forces tearing at each other… It’s rather comical.”

“To the average joe, we are the same. Us and that bunch in lab coats. All just monsters.”

Even though the situation seemed fairly hopeless, Sickle didn’t seem the least bit disturbed.

Perhaps amused by the current state of affairs, the Poet chuckled and began to wax lyrical.

“We’ve been captured. Checkmate.”

“…What is?”

“It isn’t this city that will be Alice. It’s us, and the Russo Family. Rail and Frank, and that man in the coveralls—we already were Alice. We followed Nebula’s white rabbit, and now look: We’ve found ourselves completely trapped in an alien world.”

“…”

“Where, then, is the exit? What must the captive Alices do in order to awaken? Who is the Queen of Hearts? Is it the woman leading that group in white?”

The Poet was growing more and more affected, but…

…ultimately, he closed with a question directed at himself.

“And most important of all… *Should* we wake up?”

The Poet ended his speech there, and then he only drummed his fingers on the table. After a short silence…

…without even looking at him, Sickle murmured, almost to herself.

“You’re starting to talk like yourself again.”

They thought they might have heard another explosion, far away, but…

The Chicago sky was vast and high, and the sound was immediately absorbed into the spaces between the clouds…

…and as if nothing had happened, only the infinite vivid blue looked down over the city.

LINKING CHAPTER

MISPERCEPTIONS AND INFORMATION



LINKING CHAPTER: MISPERCEPTIONS AND INFORMATION

New York In a certain café

All right… For now, I've provided you with all the information up to that point in time.

Do you still wish to hear the rest, Miss Hilton?

Should you elect to stay silent, turn on your heel, and go back to your former life, I won't hound you with the truth. To be frank, it would be a waste of time.

…I expect you already have some inkling, don't you?

Given your position, I believe you must. Most assuredly so, since you occasionally have more information among yourselves than we information brokers do.

If you had utterly failed to notice *the betrayal* by now, that would indeed be quite comical.

Before I relate the facts of what happened afterward, I should confirm a number of truths.

Doing so will make it easier for me to relate the end of the incident, which includes Mr. Isaac Dian and Miss Miria Harvent's reunion.

I imagine you'd rather not believe it, but in that case— One thing.

First, Miss Robber, I shall tell you one truth. Impress it upon you.

I told you as much at the very beginning. At this point, you must be prepared for it.

You will learn even information you would prefer not to know.

Even so, shall I tell you?

Shall I tell you what happened behind the scenes of this affair, in Alcatraz?

Although—the simple fact that I am able to tell you this must have convinced you.

You must know of the existence of a traitor who conveyed the information from that location to me…

⇔

Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary

Once again, the story returns to the past.

On the night before the serial bombings that shook Chicago—

—as the eyeball squirmed in his left hand, Firo sighed. He was in a lousy mood.

This was a special cell constructed underground, even deeper than the Dungeon. Its immortal occupant was lying in front of him with a knife plunged deep into his neck.

Huey Laforet.

Faced with the body of the immortal who was presumably behind everything, another immortal—Firo Prochainezo—shook his head wearily.

“Hey…”

The voice belonged to a third man, standing in front of him and watching the situation unfold.

This man, Ladd Russo, wore a complicated expression of both irritation and joy, and his prosthetic left hand hung limply. He directed an honest question at Firo.

“I’ve got no clue what just happened here. What’s the deal, huh?”

In the first place, Ladd had visited this room with the paradoxical objective of killing the immortal Huey.

He’d flattened the people who’d seemed to be in his way—three prisoners, a guard, and a fairy named Leeza—until the only ones standing in front of him had been the two immortals, but…

One of them had jammed a knife into the back of Huey’s neck.

“Huh? What? Hey, Firo, you’ve been pals with these Felix fellas, too? This whole time? Since they let you into the joint?”

“No. I only agreed to go along with these guys about…ten, fifteen minutes ago,” Firo answered, remembering what had happened.

Just before the guard led him down here, he had abruptly stopped on the stairs and spoken to him.

“Okay… I’ve got a request for you, Firo.”

“Tell Huey to make his own requests.”

“No, this one’s mine… It’s personal.”

“…?”

The odd comment had come out of nowhere, and Firo eyed him suspiciously.

Before, Huey’s loyal henchman had only said the bare minimum to him. But now, his eyes and tone of voice were nothing like what they’d been.

It was unsettling, and Firo warily responded: “Well, spit it out.”

At that, the guard gave a self-deprecating smile, and then…

…averting his eyes in mild embarrassment, he said one of the last things Firo would have expected.

“Would you cooperate with me…no, with *us*…and *gouge out one of Huey’s eyes*?”

“…”

Silence fell between the two of them. Firo eyed the guard dubiously.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. Shall I tell you who in here was hired on the outside as a hitman?”

“…! …Hold it. You’re saying you’re selling Huey—…uh, I mean…”

“I might be selling him out, yes,” the guard deadpanned.

There was no crazed light or ill will in his eyes. He was simply calm as he spoke.

Firo quietly asked him a question.

“What the heck are you?”

“An information network… *If you have Szilard’s knowledge, you know what I mean, don’t you?* Although Master Huey stole the half-finished research, and he was the first to complete it.”

“…!”

“I’m Sham. Pleasure.”

With a breezy smile and a lighthearted voice—the guard threatened him.

“In exchange for Ennis’s safety, and that of the nameless *ordinary people* in your family’s territory… Would you become a temporary Felix Walken?”

And I ended up giving in to his threats.

It’s not like I owe Huey anything, but…

What if he’d told me to stab the capo masto *or Maiza?*

What if it had been Isaac and Miria or Czes…or the Gandors?

Could I…? Could I stab those guys in the back like this?

Maybe not me, but… If it was Szilard, in the memories I ate…

As Firo silently fell into thought, Ladd took a step forward to close the gap between them.

“Hey now, hey, hey, hey… I won’t know what’s goin’ on if you just clam up, will I? Did the shock of knifing a guy leave you speechless…? Nah, you don’t look that wet behind the ears to me.”

“No… I’m just trying to figure out how to explain it, is all.”

Holding his head with his free hand, Firo hung on to Huey’s eye as it struggled to return to its body.

He made eye contact through the gaps of the fingers that caged it, and then—

Although there was probably no connection, a third party chose that very moment to speak up.

“I’ll explain the rest.”

“Hunh…?”

When the two of them turned around, the Asian guy Ladd had coldcocked slowly swayed upright.

Then, strangely, as the Asian—Dragon—finished speaking, the huge black man sat up and spoke in the same way as the first.

"We twisted Firo's arm a bit and asked him to help us out."

"What's this…?"

Ladd frowned, and this time, the small white man sat up.

"Maybe I should reintroduce myself, Mr. Ladd Russo."

"…Nah, no need. That ain't necessary, so just go die again."

Ladd clenched his fist, as if telling him not to waste his breath, but the little man chuckled and dropped a name.

"Lua, wasn't it? She's quite a looker, isn't she?"

"…?!"

At the unexpected mention of her, Ladd froze.

Lua? Who's that? Maybe Ladd's…?

From his response, Firo guessed at the woman's relationship with Ladd. Then, realizing that this was the exact same way he'd been cornered, he frowned in irritation.

"Hey, bastards… What do you know about Lua?"

"Nothing about who she is on the inside, certainly, but… I am confident that I could kill her at any time. *Even now…right this second.*"

Ladd's eyes widened at that, and his expression filled with anger, astonishment, and a little uncertainty.

Watching him, the small white man chuckled—

—and as he continued, the same words came from the mouth of the guard who'd first had the rifle, at the exact same time.

““I don’t believe I’ve properly introduced myself.””

With every sentence, another voice joined the others from one of the men sitting up. It was less like listening to a choir than hearing the exact same words from several different radios.

“““““The former Felix Walken’ is one of my names. However…”””””

Ultimately, the team of hitmen that Ladd had floored instantly, all the former Felix Walkens, were speaking in unison. Their voices were eerie and grave, and their tones were perfectly uniform.

“““““If we are viewing the situation from a broader perspective, let me introduce myself as Sham.”””””

The quartet played from four speakers, with no difference but the timbre of the voices.

Then, even the guard still on his face outside the door spoke, and the five men—Sham, one of the twins—saluted Ladd respectfully.

“““““““It’s a pleasure.”””””””

⟺

All right. I shall give you the details of their situation later on. Slowly, along with the end of the Chicago affair.

…You’ve fallen silent. Are you feeling unwell, Miss Hilton?

Or rather, considering your current emotions…should I call you, not Hilton, but *Miss Leeza*?

From your expression, I gather you suspected but were not certain.

More to the point, you didn’t want to believe. Or so your face tells me.

Hmmmm. That is a problem. There is no guarantee that all of Huey's creations will swear loyalty to him. Looking at Rail must have told you as much.

Hmm. Rail… That boy is a child deserving of pity.

I expect rebelling against his creator was the only way he could win his freedom. The gloom building inside him may have driven him mad, guiding him to the lunacy responsible for those explosions.

…Carol. Don't look at me like that. If anything, I am praising the boy. After all, at the very least, he gained enough control of his own world that he was able to go mad of his own volition.

I have not yet heard what became of him. Once I return to my headquarters, the president may tell me— But let us pray that he has found a happy ending, at least.

That aside. No matter what you do when you hear this story, Miss Hilton, it is too late.

It is already over.

The links between these people may have seemed coincidental, but they certainly weren't entirely so… At this point, I expect that fact is beginning to dawn on you.

As is the fact that this realization is coming too late.

If you still wish to hear the rest of this tale, even so…

Very well. I shall tell it.

The tale of the man and woman who upset all calculations, torn from each other and then reunited.

In the end, was the outcome they precipitated coincidence, or not?

It may prove amusing to compare it with all that you know and think it over at your leisure.

Now then, where should I begin…?

Should I start with the arrival of the train in Chicago?

Should I relate the details of the serial bombings and disappearances, based on testimonies from those involved?

Should I commence with the tale of the joker left behind in New York?

Or perhaps with the story of the poor lovers destined to be separated once more… Hmm, that might mean skipping a bit too much.

Mind you, it ultimately makes no difference where I begin.

No matter what order I tell it in, gleaning ideas from the facts and converting them into truth is a task for your mind.

That—is an essential characteristic of the troublesome beast we call information, and it is also its highest virtue.

Now then, let me relate it to you.

The tale of a young woman left behind in New York, with no way of knowing of the tragedy that had befallen her own father…

DIGRESSION

CAN'T MISS



DIGRESSION: CAN'T MISS

New York Millionaires' Row

As they walked among the palatial residences that bespoke their owners' success, a man and woman were conversing. Their exchange was truly odd, perplexing to anyone watching.

"So you're worried about what that jerk with the blindfold is planning, Chané?"

"…"

"I see… I doubt they'd get anything out of messing with Jacuzzi's gang, though."

"…"

"Well yeah, that's true. Besides, even if they don't do anything, your dad's henchmen might meddle with 'em somehow."

"…"

The woman, Chané Laforet, nodded; the man—Vino, aka Felix Walken, aka Claire Stanfield—kept gazing at her face out of the corner of his eye as they walked along.

Chané wasn't saying a word, and she didn't appear to be using sign language or writing down what she wanted to say, but Vino was keeping up a conversation so natural it was like he was reading her mind.

From a bystander's point of view, the man was subjecting a silent woman to a deluded, one-sided monologue, and an odd atmosphere enveloped the whole street.

"I see. So they might have been singled out as test subjects since they got involved once last year?"

“…”

“It’s fine. Your dad will understand. You still love him a lot, even now, right?”

“…”

“Then there’s no problem.”

“…”

“By the way, who do you like better, me or your dad?”

“……!”

“I’m sorry—you didn’t have to put it like that. I was a little curious, that’s all; having you tell me off for it is, well, frankly… It hurts.”

“…”

“Thanks. You’re so kind, Chané.”

Vino kept quietly walking, wearing a smile like a little kid’s.

They were on their way back to the second Genoard residence from Madison Square Park, and Chané’s face was a little tense.

A short while earlier, she’d been surrounded by a group dressed in black, and a former comrade of hers—Spike—had grilled her about what her father was planning.

That was when the former Felix Walken had joined them, and she’d temporarily found herself in a serious predicament— But Vino had arrived, and she’d gotten through it. Afterward, Chané started worrying about the safety of her other friends, and now they were walking briskly through town on their way to check on them.

“Well anyway, just relax. I’ll keep everyone safe, and you can take that to the bank.”

“…”

Before long, the two of them were standing on a stretch of Fifth Avenue known as Millionaires' Row, in front of a well-kept, comfortably lived-in house. There, the couple shared their thoughts again.

"Yeah, after all, what's important to you is important to me, too, Chané… Aw, that's kinda embarrassing, so don't mention it to the fellas inside, all right?"

"…"

Chané blushed, nodding wordlessly. Vino nodded back, looking satisfied, and flung open the door of the mansion.

"Hey! How's everybody do—?"

"…"

His jocular greeting broke off, and Chané stiffened beside him, her eyes widening.

It was deserted.

All they saw was a terribly quiet corridor.

In an ordinary house, that sight wouldn't have been a problem, but this mansion was rather unique, and it was currently serving as a hangout for close to thirty delinquents.

Normally, there were always at least five of them loitering in the entrance hall— But today, inexplicably, no one was there.

"…Did they go out or something?"

"…"

Chané's expression was rapidly growing anxious. Vino squeezed her shoulders lightly, then ducked outside again and pressed the doorbell beside the front door.

Di-di-di-di-ding, di-di-di-di-di-ding

After a few seconds, two men poked their heads out of the shadows in the hall.

“Huh? Mr. Felix and Chané. What’s the matter?”

“What, you’re done with your date already?”

On seeing Vino and Chané, the Asian man and the Irishman—Fang and Jon—sounded a little surprised.

“Hey, you *are* here. Where’s Jacuzzi and everybody else?”

Fang and Jon weren’t acting any different than usual. Relieved to see it, Vino asked about the house’s other residents, Jacuzzi Splot and his gang, who had apparently stepped out for a bit. However…

…the next moment, Fang and Jon glanced at each other with complicated expressions.

“Well… It’s a pretty awkward situation. You remember Miss Miria’s fella, Isaac, right? I don’t know whether it was yesterday or today, but they let him out of the pen.”

“We don’t know what’s up, exactly, but after he got out, he didn’t have enough money for the train ticket home.”

“So Miria got a phone call, and she went to Chicago, to take him his wallet.”

Isaac and Miria.

They were a cheerful, slightly loopy couple who often dropped by the mansion.

Vino hadn’t interacted with them much, but when Chané heard that Isaac was out of jail, her eyes widened in surprise. When he saw that, Vino happily interpreted.

“I see. That’s great. Chané’s so glad you’d have thought it was her good news.”

“Ah, right. Chané and Miria have been especially close lately.”

“Yeah… That’s good. It’s good…but…”

He was half-convinced already, but Vino asked Chané’s question, straight-out. Granted, he’d been wondering the same thing anyway.

“Why Jacuzzi, too?”

“…”

Fang and Jon shared a silent look, and Vino muttered with mild chagrin:

“And actually…did everybody go except you guys?”

⇔

The next day Chicago Union Station

The mood on the train that had pulled into the station was far tenser than normal.

The serial bombing incidents had occurred in Elleson Hill, which was right next to Chicago. The two hundred simultaneous missing-person cases had involved the city as well.

As the epicenter of these two major incidents, which had shaken the whole country, Chicago’s nerves were stretched as tightly as they had been during its Great Fire, sixty-three years ago.

It wasn’t safe to trust strangers, and even acquaintances couldn’t be trusted completely.

The crimes clearly hadn't been the work of a lone culprit, and the citizens' fearful suspicions made them wary of the newcomers to the city as well.

And now…

Completely ignoring all of it, a lone woman energetically clambered down from the train.

"Isaac…!"

Miria shouted as she left the train, but it was no use: Her voice was drowned out by the crowd in the station.

Even though she hadn't heard a response, she was spinning around and around, searching for her beau.

The next one to step off the train called to her. "Miria, Isaac isn't here yet. If he's coming from San Francisco, he won't arrive until tomorrow, or possibly the day after." This girl wore a distinctive combination of glasses over an eye patch.

"I know, but…I thought, 'Just maybe,' and then I just had to call his name!"

Miria gave a twirl as she spoke, recoloring the ominous mood around her in the blink of an eye.

As if they'd come specifically to watch her, a group of more than twenty noisy, chattering young people got out of the train.

"Yowza… Man, talk about a blast from the past. Seriously, I can't believe this."

"Hyah-haw." "Hyah-haa."

"Nwah, it been ages. City smells. Takes me back."

“We’re here, we’re here!” “Whoa, Chicago. I mean it, get a load of this place. Man, it’s a super-metropolis.”

“Gehyaaah.” “Calm down, fellas. Save the noise for after we’re through the ticket gate, a’ight?”

The platform was suddenly very noisy.

As the boys and girls each offered their thoughts, nothing about any of it betrayed any sense of anxiety… Nothing except for one person: a man hiding in the shadow of the train door, his eyes darting wildly.

“Hey, Jacuzzi! What the heck are you doing?!”

When one of the delinquent boys called to him, the young man with the tattooed face flinched, then hastily waved his hands and shouted at his friends in the voice of one on the verge of tears.

“W-wait! D-d-d-don’t! Don’t call my name…! I-if somebody from the Russo Family hears…!”

The group was originally from Chicago, and the frightened Jacuzzi Splot had lammed off to New York after a fight with the Russo Family. His delinquent friends had fled there with him and become residents of that city.

Ordinarily, they wouldn’t have been able to come back here, but immediately after they’d heard the news about the bombings on the radio, they’d gotten that phone call from Isaac saying to meet him in Chicago. Jacuzzi had tried to stop her (“It’s not safe to go to Chicago now! It’s dangerous!”), but Miria’s mind was made up, and it was obvious that she wouldn’t be dissuaded.

On top of that, deep down, Jacuzzi was also worried about Graham, who was currently in Chicago. Then Nice had commented, “I wonder what sort of bombs they used…,” setting off a whole chain: “In that case, me too.” “Me three.” “Besides, I’m worried about Jacuzzi.”

“Come to think of it, I left the laundry hanging out at my place in Chicago. I should get that inside.” “I get the feeling I have a sick little sister waiting for me.” “Man, you ain’t got no little sisters!” “Let’s just settle things with the Russo Family. What a pain in the butt.” “Yodel-ay-ee-oooo.”

Terribly confused, Jacuzzi was simply swept up in the current, and the next thing he knew, they’d already left the house and bought their tickets.

After the momentum had carried him onto the train, Jacuzzi realized that he was heading into danger…and ever since then, he’d been shivering nonstop, no matter what they’d said to him.

“I’m tellin’ you, it’s fine. Remember what they said on the radio? I don’t really get it, but I heard the cops are after that old fart Placido. There’s no way he’s got time to bother with you now, Jacuzzi.”

Jacuzzi shook his head forcefully and argued with his friend, his eyes full of tears.

“We don’t know that! Maybe Placido’s so desperate he’ll try to take me down with him…”

“Hunh? I doubt a little guy like you is valuable enough for anybody to want to take you down with them. Don’t get full of yourself.”

“That was mean!!”

“Never mind, just get off the train! Or do you want to ride all the way to the West Coast?”

In response to his friends’ calls (whether they were cold or warm was anyone’s guess), Jacuzzi reluctantly stepped down from the train, but—

Immediately, a man ran up and shoved him out of his way, sending him sprawling spectacularly to the ground.

“M-move it!”

The man spat out the words without apologizing, then dashed in through the door Jacuzzi had just left.

“Eep! I-I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

Even though he hadn’t done anything wrong, Jacuzzi wasted an apology on him. However, Nice had seen it happen, and her face was tense as she muttered to him:

“Jacuzzi.”

“Wh-what? What’s wrong, Nice?”

“That man… He was a Russo Family executive…”

“…I should be able to rest for a bit now.”

After confirming that he was indeed on the train, Krieck finally managed to draw a deep breath.

Leaning against the corridor that led to the passenger compartments, he reviewed his own situation.

After that mess the night before, he’d seen his own friends eaten by that woman in the lab coat, and he had fled from the Russo mansion.

He’d kept running for more than a day, peering out from the darkness to see whether there was anyone following him.

Then, concluding that he’d managed to lose them somehow, Krieck had bought a ticket for the transcontinental railroad and boarded this train with the intent of skipping town.

“Dammit… What the hell was that? Nobody told me about that…”

Remembering the sight of his friends getting sucked into the woman’s slim arm, Krieck shuddered again. He didn’t know whether the cause

was their now-immortal bodies or the woman's arm, but… Either way, the friends who'd been eaten were probably dead.

That realization weighed on him heavily, and once again, terror grew inside him at the circumstances in which he'd landed.

"Well, I won't really be able to relax until after the train's pulled out."

On that thought, as if he was fleeing from something, Krieck turned toward the car with the passenger compartments—

And saw the palm of a hand.

Between the slender, pale fingers, he caught a glimpse of eyes smiling innocently behind a pair of glasses—

And that was the very last thing Krieck saw.

"H-huh…?"

Jacuzzi had come to investigate and peered into the cars from the train door. He glanced in both directions, but he didn't see Krieck.

"I wonder where he went…"

As he looked around dubiously, he abruptly made eye contact with a woman in a lab coat standing by the door.

A doctor?

Just as Jacuzzi was wondering *Why here?* the bespectacled woman gave an exaggerated shriek. "Yeek?! I-I'm sorry, I beg your pardon, please forgive me!"

"Huh?!"

Realizing she must have been startled by his tattoo, Jacuzzi hastily waved his hands and tried to clear up the misunderstanding.

“I-I’m sorry! You’ve got it all wrong! I’m not a robber or anything—oh, although, I did rob a train a long time ago, but, um, that’s not what I’m doing now, at least! U-um, I-I’m looking for a man with a scar on his face who just got onto this train! Except I couldn’t find him anywhere! And so—so, have you seen him? I’m sorry, excuse meeee!”

Tearing up, Jacuzzi practically hemorrhaged personal information, and the woman sounded perplexed as she responded.

“Huh?! Um, he came through, but…he went somewhere else.”

“I-is that right…? I’m sorry, thank you very much!”

Deciding that pursuing the issue further would be a bad idea, Jacuzzi nodded politely to the bespectacled woman, then went back to the platform where his friends were waiting.

Looking uneasy, the boy with the tattoo on his face climbed down from the train again.

As she watched him go, Renee gazed at her right hand and thought.

“Hmm. Really… When the bodies get absorbed into your right hand, where *do* they go?”

She hadn’t told Jacuzzi a single lie just now.

While she sifted through the memories of the man who had “gone somewhere else” through her right hand, Renee thought about the bodies’ destination.

“…To hell?”

Realizing that the answer she’d come up with was ridiculous, she folded her arms and thought. Was it possible that absorbing the knowledge from that man had actually made her dumber?

For a little while after that, she continued to ponder the question of where the bodies went. However, deciding that she wasn't likely to find an answer under the present circumstances, she drew a deep breath and stepped onto the station platform.

"Huey might know!" she murmured blithely, although no one heard her. "Aaah. I just can't wait for his eye to get here…"

Her voice was truly innocent, devoid of even a hint of malice.

With an easygoing tone that belied the creepiness of her words, Renee looked up at the blue sky over Chicago.

The Chicago skyscrapers gleamed golden in the bright sun, shining over everything…

Providing the city and its people with a sky that was just as blue as ever.

Radiantly, brilliantly…

Just then, Miria happened to be looking up at the sky as well, and her innocent voice echoed through the station.

"I hope I see Isaac soon!"

Those words traveled far, far away through the Chicago sky.

As if to sweep away the mood of all the events that had happened in this town.

And as if to signal the beginning of the incident that was about to occur…

Mocking that blue sky, a new explosion echoed through the streets of Chicago.


BACCANO!
1934: Streets—The End
To be continued in Baccano! 1934: Finale…

AFTERWORD

Hello, Narita here.

All right, this was the Streets volume, which was intended to answer the question, "What was the incident that occurred behind the scenes of the Prison volume?"

This 1934 story follows a formula that's different from both 1931 and 1933.

It is, frankly speaking…a three-volume story.

That said, rather than Part 1, Part 2, Part 3, it's more as if there are two types of Part 1, while the next volume, which will conclude the 1934 arc, will move the story along simultaneously in both Alcatraz and Chicago. It's the first long stretch in *Baccano!*, but I hope you'll stick with me to the end!

Okay. So in this book, the Streets story ends.

Well, that aside. Last time, in the Prison volume, there were almost no new characters, and the story was composed of people who were relatively normal, but this Streets volume is full of new faces. It turned into a *Baccano!* story with lots of characters who were somehow broken or very colorful. Next up is the concluding volume for *Baccano!* 1934 (although *Hariyama, the Center of the World*, a collection of short stories serialized on *Dengeki hp*, will be released in the middle), but to those of you who thought, *That's a lot of* Baccano! *in a row*... There's a reason.

On that note, I have an announcement for all the readers…

Ahem. Those of you who saw the book band or *Canned Dengeki* are probably already aware of this, but— They're making a *Baccano!* anime!

Heh-heh-heh… Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

It's been close to two years since they first told me there was going to be an anime. Every time I saw comments online like, "They really couldn't make an anime out of a Narita story, could they?" and "Unless his sales go up, there's no way," and "As if something that messy with that many characters could ever be an anime," and "It doesn't have many regular cute girls in it, so they couldn't turn it into an anime," I thought, *Heh-heh-heh… You people have misread the era!* I had the urge to release the information on my own website, but because of NDAs, I couldn't do it. And actually, now that I think about it, that would have been way too immature, so I should be grateful for the contractual obligation to keep quiet.

…Huh? I get the feeling I wrote something like this in the Prison volume afterword…!

There are probably some readers who think they shouldn't make it into an anime if it's just going to turn out weird, but have no fear. I have some information that will remove all cause for concern from (Censored) .

…My editor told me I'm not allowed to publish any details on the production company or the staff yet. Still, I'm confident that they'll be able to make something good! After all, apparently the staff went to New York to scout out locations!! Even I haven't been there… This isn't good. They may very well end up depicting New York far more realistically than the novels, and if that happens, I won't have a leg to stand on.

That said, even though I'm already getting my hopes up and getting excited and am unable to do my job, as the anime and manga move forward, my schedule keeps getting more and more packed… What is this hopeless, hope-filled situation? Anyway, they should gradually

release detailed information on *Canned Dengeki* and *Dengeki hp*, so make sure to watch for it!

In addition, the *Baccano!* serial finally starts running in the issue of *Gao!* that goes on sale on the twenty-seventh of this month!

I'm currently looking at Ginyuu Shijin's rough drafts, and I already can't wait for them to be finished. Last time, Ginyuu Shijin's editor sent him all sorts of manga, to the point where he was in danger of being brainwashed. The other day, Mr. Ogino the editor told me, "Please send him the manga you read when you want to get yourself psyched up, Narita! Put some pressure on him!" so I bought up around sixty volumes of all sorts of manga, including all of *Air Master* and all of *Yoiyami Gentou Soushi*, and sent them over to him… I'm starting to seriously think that Mr. Ogino and I are attempting to brainwash a manga artist, but I'm sure that's just my imagination.

I forgot to send the really important stuff, like the materials (paperbacks and photos) of 1930s gangs and trains, but I'm sure that's also just my imagination. I'm sorry, I lied; I'll send them soon.

In any case, I hope you, dear readers, enjoy the comic version as well!

All right: Next time, we'll finally be into the second half of 1934. I'm planning to start with the details on the Chicago serial-bombings-and-disappearances incident, and I'd like to smoothly blend the atmospheres from the Prison and Streets volumes. At the time of writing this afterword, I'm in the middle of writing it, so there's still no telling how it's going to come out, but…

Anyway, the *Baccano!* series will continue, so please keep an eye out for it!

*And now for the usual thank-yous.

To my editor, Wada (Papio), for whom I'm constantly causing problems. To Chief Editor Suzuki and the people of the editorial department. To the copy editors, for whom I'm always causing trouble by being a slow worker, every single time. To the designers, who make my books look good. To the people of the publicity department, the printing department, the marketing department, and Media Works as a whole.

To my family, friends, and acquaintances, who always take care of me in all sorts of ways, and particularly to everyone in S City.

To Ginyuu Shijin and Ogino the manga editor, who boosted my energy for me in many ways.

To Katsumi Enami, who breathed life into the multitude of new characters with magnificent illustrations, even though I ended up forcing an insane schedule onto him.

And to all the readers…

Thank you very much!

October 2006

In the middle of a two-hour standoff with a spider that showed up in my apartment.

Ryohgo Narita

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink

Download all your Fav Light Novels from

Just Light Novels

Stay up to date On Light Novels
updates by Joining our DISCORD group

